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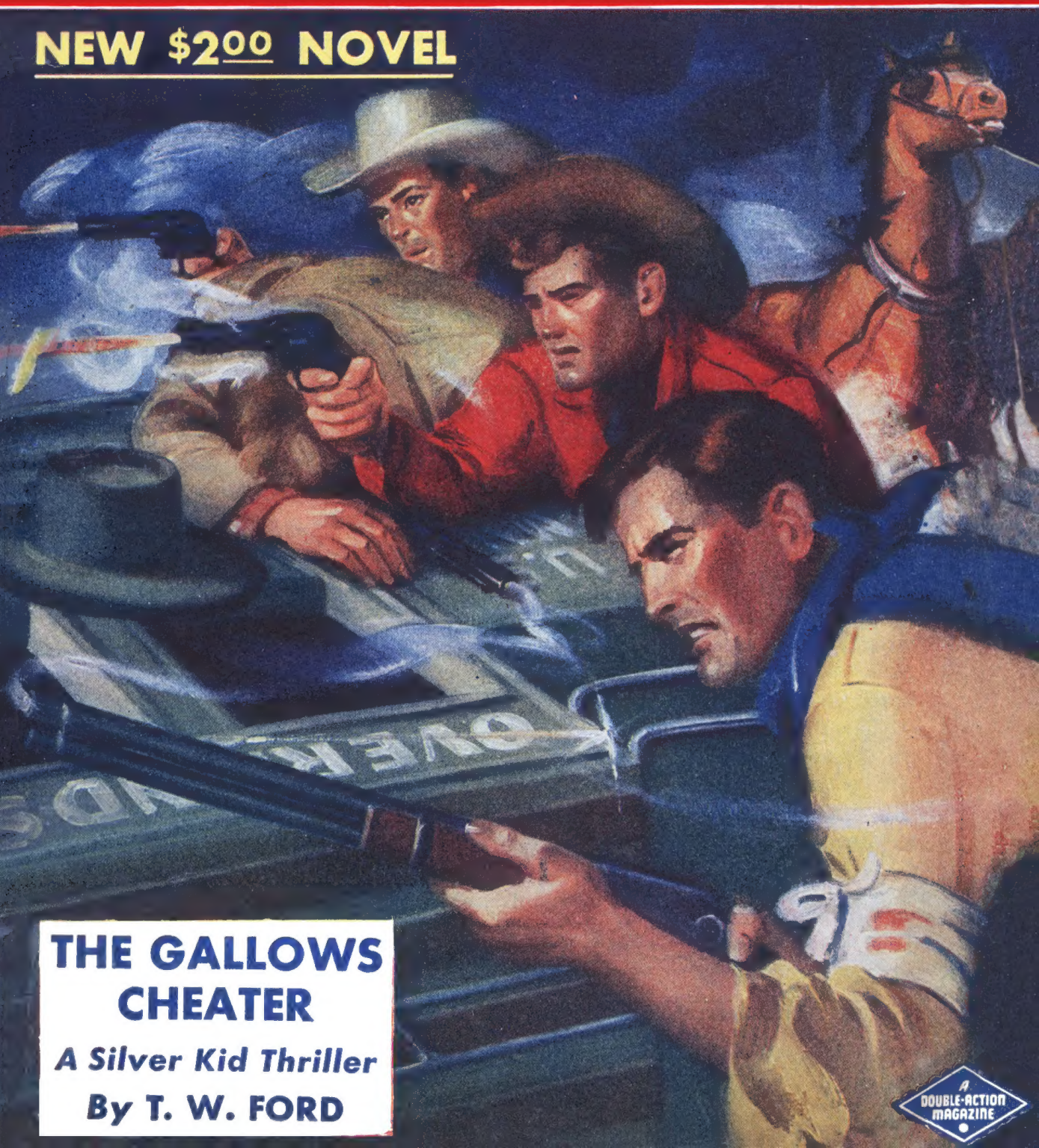

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A Silver Kid Thriller

By T. W. FORD

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and as a result of that little talk with God a strange Power came into my life. After 42 years of horrible, dismal, sickening failure, everything took on a brighter hue. It's fascinating to talk with God, and it can be done very easily once you learn the secret. And when you do—well—there will come into your life the same dynamic Power which came into mine. The shackles of defeat which bound me for years went a-shimmering—and now—?—well, I am President of the News-Review Publishing Company, which corporation publishes the largest circulating afternoon daily in North Idaho. I own the largest office building in our City, I drive a beautiful Cadillac limousine, I own my own home which has a lovely pipe-organ in it, and my family are abundantly provided for after I'm gone. And all this has

Dr. Frank B. Robinson

●

been made possible because one day, 18 years ago, I actually and literally talked with God.

You, too, may experience that strange mystical Power which comes from talking wtih God, and when you do, if there is poverty, unrest, unhappiness, or ill-health in your life, well—this same God-Power is able to do for you what it did for me. No matter how useless or helpless your life seems to be—all this can be changed. For this is not a human Power I'm talking about—it's a God-Power. And there can be no limitations to the God-Power, can there? Of course not. You probably would like to know how you, too, may talk with God, so that this same Power which brought me these good things might come into your life, too. Well—just write a letter or a post-card to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. M-10, Moscow, Idaho, and full particulars of this strange Teaching will be sent to you free of charge. But write now—while you are in the mood. It only costs one cent to find out, and this might easily be the most profitable one cent you have ever spent. It may sound unbelievable—but it's true, or I wouldn't tell you it was.—Advt.

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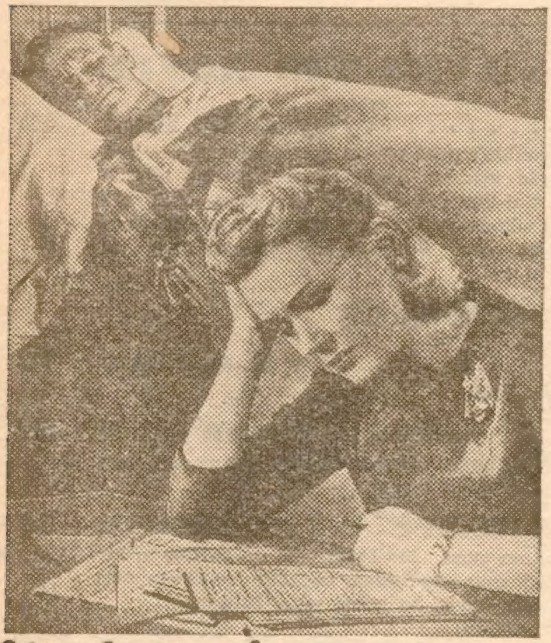

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Volume II ★ March, 1945 ★ Number 5

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A guilty man, condemned to swing, wouldn't pass up an opportunity to make a successful jail-break. That's what made lawmen begin to suspect that maybe Mack Royson was innocent, after all. But the trail of proof was long, and Fate seemed to be snatching every possible witness to Royson's innocence away. Then Solo Strant, the Silver Kid, stepped in, and Destiny's double-deal began in real earnest!

SHORT STORIES

SIX POINTS OF THE LAW . . . . . **By E. C. Shaw** **78**

Judge Wellers fights fire with a bigger fire!

SPOOK RANGE . . . . . **By Joe Austell Small** **82**

Slim Saunders made a sad mistake when he let Panther Grease slip away, then had to go out on a spook-infested hunt for the horse!

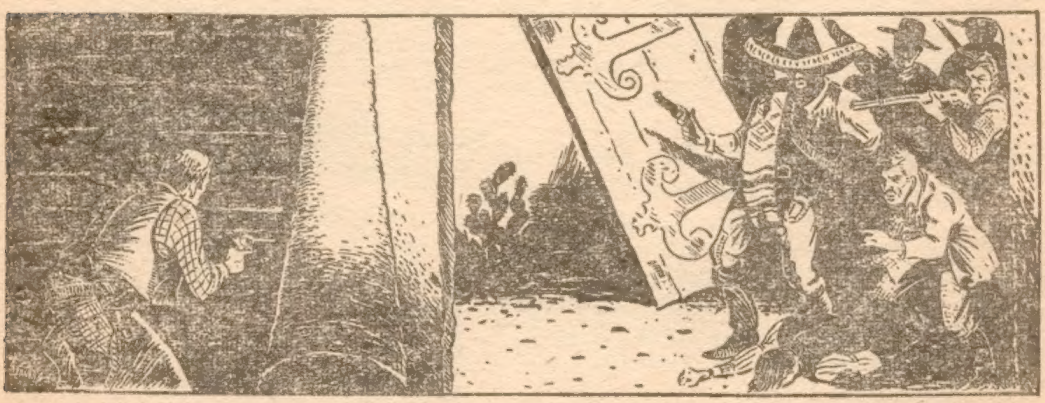
GREEK LOUIE'S HANGROPE RECIPE . . . **By Lee Floren** **86**

Louie was a man of peace; he carried no guns. But there was no yellow in his heart, and when he saw Madge Smith facing heartbreak, because Joe Cruse was hell-bound for Boothill trouble with Hank Davis, he knew what to do!

CHUCK WAGON CIRCLE . . . . . **By D. C. Kerr** **110**

A Fact Article of the West.

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor



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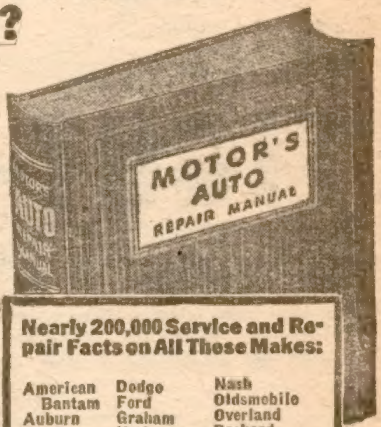

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Charles Atlas

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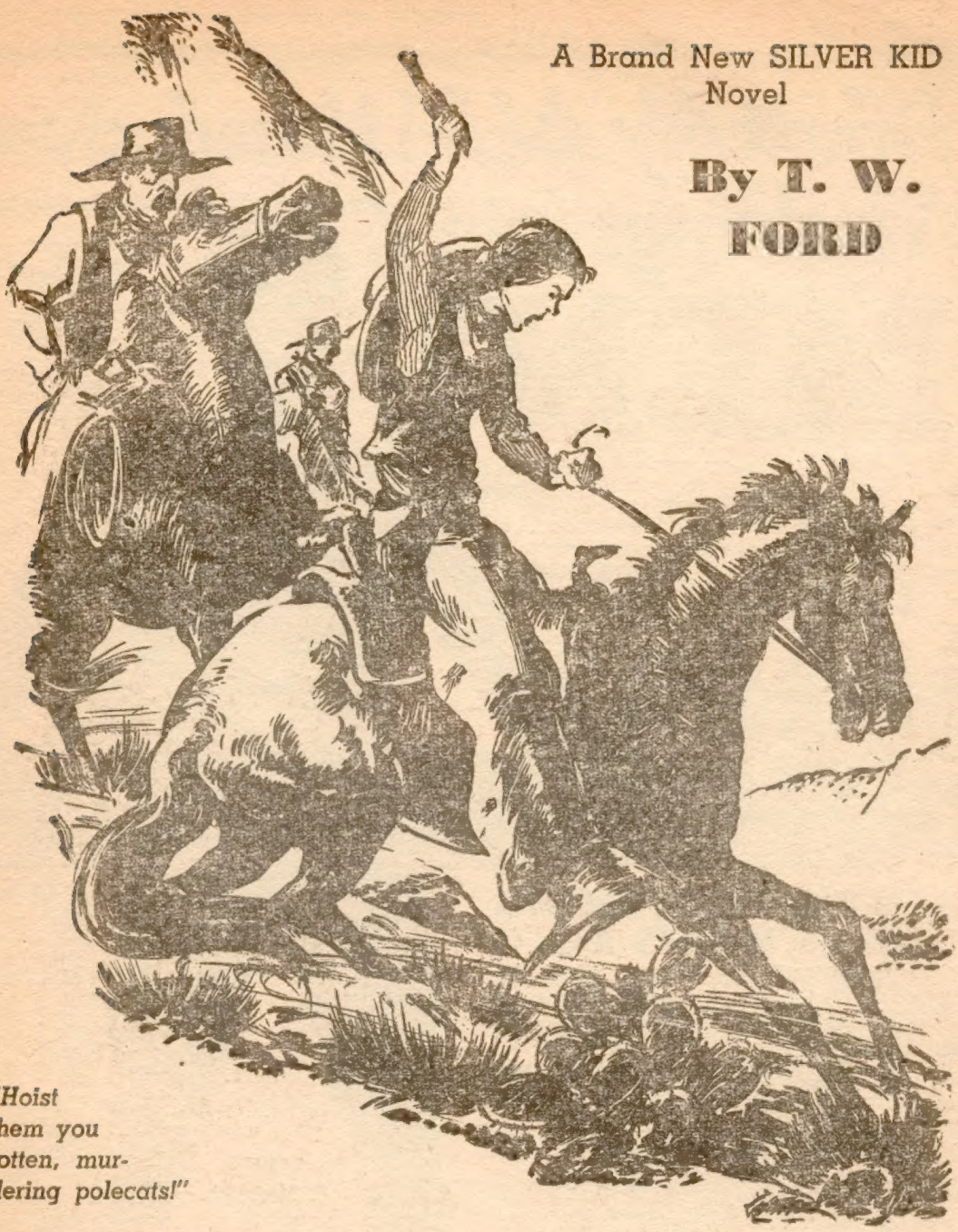
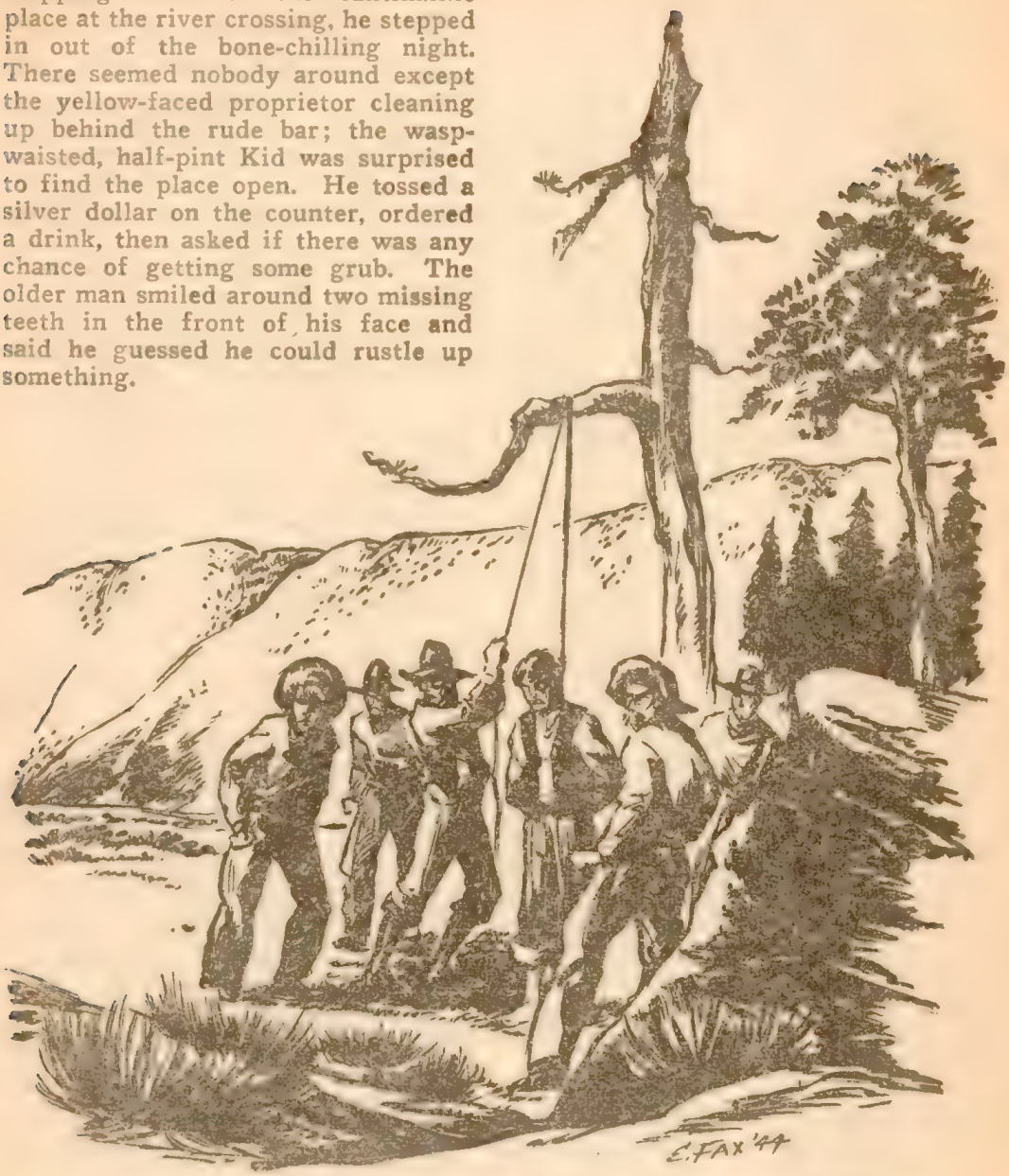


"Hoist them you rotten, murdering polecats!"

THE GALLOWS CHEATER

THE Kid came out of the rain and walked in on Death. It was as unexpected as having your hat slide over your ears. Yellow slicker pulled around him after leaving his pony momentarily under the dripping eaves of the cantinalike place at the river crossing, he stepped in out of the bone-chilling night. There seemed nobody around except the yellow-faced proprietor cleaning up behind the rude bar; the wasp-waisted, half-pint Kid was surprised to find the place open. He tossed a silver dollar on the counter, ordered a drink, then asked if there was any chance of getting some grub. The older man smiled around two missing teeth in the front of his face and said he guessed he could rustle up something.



Up in State Prison, Mack Royson sat waiting for the day they would lead him out to the gallows, while a dying lawman gasped out an incredible story to Solo Strant, the Silver Kid. For Mack Royson was innocent of the crime for which he was about to swing, and only a few, hunted outlaws could prove his innocence. And the justice trail that Strant took up, when Deputy Chan Murphy cashed in his chips, led ***the Silver Kid straight to a hangrope noose himself!***

It was as he clumped down a short hallway to the cook-shack in the rear that the Kid caught the voices from the private room in the back. He thought there was something about one of them that was familiar, then dismissed the idea because he knew nobody here in the Horseshoe Bend country. The voice came again, wrangling, hot in argument, another and then a third rising over it. "I'm not talking, dammit!" one spat. "You don't get me going down there to see no danged Law officials!"

The proprietor with the parchment-like skin stuck his head out of the hallway. He squinted as he sized up the diminutive Solo Strant, looking more boyish than ever in the voluminous slicker. The boss wagged his head n e g a t i v e l y. He thumbed toward the back room. "Hard-case hombres, there. Don't try to butt in, younker. Very tough hombres!"

The Kid smiled in his sleepy way; he saw no reason why he should want to butt in.

"I tell you, Mack Royson will die—he'll be hung—for something he's completely innocent of—you gotta come back and tell them what you know!" the deeper voice behind the shut door insisted. There was something about that voice that rang a familiar note vaguely in the back of the Silver Kid's brain.

The boss shuffled back in to say he was cooking up some grub. Solo Strant had another drink, building a quirly with his incredibly deft hands as he sipped it. The proprietor had retired to the cook-shack again. There was a sharp laugh from the other side of the door.

"Tables have sorta changed, huh, mister?" said a drawling man. "Now I'm calling the play! You hold right small cards of a sudden, eh?" That sounded like a card game. The Kid wondered if what he heard before could have been correct. He heard another door in that back-room slam as if somebody had just entered. Boots thudded on the floor. "Now, the last hand has been played and me and my friends are leaving," went on the drawling one. "Don't make no trouble, please!"

"Good Gawd in Heaven, you can't let an innocent man die!" cried the deeper-voiced one. "Just because there is some slight risk to you—"

"Go to Hell with your whining!" And the door of the backroom leading into the bar was flung open. Four men with drawn guns came backing through it. One of them was a pole-tall redhead with big outset ears. The other three wore hats and coats, were wet with rain. "I'm leaving now, Pop," the redhead yelled in the general direction of the kitchen.

"Don't," said a quiet voice from the street door of the bar.

INSTINCT had started the Kid's hands shooting across his body for his silver-stocked guns, slung butts forward for his deadly cross-arm draw. But he had to push open his slicker first. The little man in the doorway, face shadowed by his water-dripping hat, was plainly one of those who had just entered that room from the rear—a friend of the red-haired gent. And the little man, undershot jaw stuck out, had an ugly gun barrel bared and levelled on the Kid. "Don't," he called softly again. "Ain't you happy now?"

Before the Kid could answer, not understanding the situation, he got a glance of the other two left in the backroom. One of them, the deep-voiced one, he recognized. Chan Murphy, a deputy sheriff from over at Hogarth. He was gangling, middle-aged, with a graying mustache. He spotted Solo Strant, cried:

"Don't let 'em go, Kid! Don't—for the lovva Gawd!" And in the face of the red-haired one's drawn weapon, Murphy went for his thronged-down hogleg in a desperate gesture.

The Kid had no choice. Chan Murphy was his friend, a straight-shooting, hard-bitten badge-packer of the old school—an hombre who always gave another man a fair shake. Solo Strant sent his hands diving for his silver Colts stocks as he whipped sideward. After that everything was some kind of a vortex.

A slug plunked into the bar in front of the icy-nerved Kid. Hot java

splashed over him as old Pop, the proprietor, coming in from the cookshack, flung a coffee pot he carried. One of the men coming from the backroom whirled and triggered at the Kid who was thus between two fires.

But, with his deadly speed, he had already sent a shot slashing past the ear of Red Head. It caused him to leap sideward, throwing off his aim momentarily. Solo spun half around. The little, vicious-jawed monkey at the door had triggered his way again. The Kid's twin weapons chanted their war song, and the man hurtled backward a yard then settled in the doorway—settled like a man who plans to stay on that spot a long time, a bullet hole in his forehead.

THE whole joint thundered and re-echoed with the rocking roar of hoglegs under its low ceiling. Splinters sprayed up at the Kid's feet and one bullet plucked a hole in his black shirt sleeve. He had already shed the slicker. He saw Chan Murphy and the seedy-looking, sharp-faced hairpin in there with him firing. Then a redeye bottle, thrown by Pop, caromed off the bar surface and plunked the Kid alongside the head.

It would have been almost funny if his life hadn't been at stake. Not completely unconscious, he went staggering down along the bar like a wobble-legged drunkard. His hat slid down over his eyes, his guns dangling from limp helpless hands. Backward and forward he swayed and reeled, as lead snapped and bit around him; by a miracle, none touched him.

Then his iron will-power lifted him out of the fog. He flung back to the bar counter, stumbled over a chair behind him, and was in the wide-legged gunman's crouch, body slaunchways. His weapons swung up, steadying.

"The damned Silver Kid!" one of them shouted through the din. "It's that Kid!"

Getting his eyes focussed, he saw Chan Murphy sinking in the doorway of the backroom. Behind him stood the shabby, sharp-faced one, steadying a smoking Colts. The Kid sighted Red Head, crouched behind a pillar, as he shot back at the doorway. Solo let him have one slug; he rolled over with a screech of pain, gun arm drilled.

One of the rain-marked trio who'd been with him was already down, a gun shot wound where his right ear had been. The other two were backing out the front door. Solo Strant wheeled their way, legs still unsteady. He fired once and missed. Nothing was very clear to his dazed sense of perception right then.

He saw Pop at the front end of the bar, leaned over and bent a gun barrel glancingly over his skull. Pop sank. The Kid checked on Red Head again. The latter now lay very still behind the post. Blood ran in a moist red serpent across the floor from his ear. To the Kid's experienced eye it was plain Red Head was damned dead, but he couldn't remember having shot him fatally after having put him out of action with a broken arm.

Solo's head turned. Kneeling in the doorway of the backroom was Chan Murphy. Hit badly, he was practically out on his feet, one hand stemmed against his side. Then a hand bearing a gun slipped into sight from behind the door of that backroom. The gun seemed aimed at the back of helpless Murphy's head. The lamp was now out in the backroom. All the Kid could see was the glitter of the gun and the shape of the hand holding it.

LOOKING sleepier than ever, the Kid steadied his right gun across the forearm of his other arm. Twice he rode that trigger. The gun coming around the opened door flew into the air. There was a human's screech of pain, and the shabby sharp-faced one, who'd been with Murphy, staggered into view, cursing thinly. He rocked back and forth as he gripped his right hand. Across the back of it, blood ran in a welt.

"Holy Gawd!" he cried out. "I'm with Murphy! I'm the cousin of Mack Royson, the man who's going to hang!"

"I thought you were going to gun Murph!" the Kid burst, stricken.

"Are you locoed?" screamed Mort Royson as he cursed some more with

the pain of that hand. "I was trying for a shot at them others!"

Solo Strant stared at it, sad-eyed. It was his famed bullet brand, the track of a slug cut across the back of the hand below the knuckles. And no man who wore it ever lived long; the curse of the thing had never failed. The Kid hated the thought of having put it on an innocent hombre.

CHAPTER II

HE HAD already rushed out the front door, but the two who had departed were swallowed in the wetness of the night. In that kind of a rain, Solo realized their tracks would be obliterated in a matter of moments. A man couldn't see much more than arm's length anyway. When he came back inside the place, he was ready to shake the truth out of the proprietor. But Chan Murphy cleared him.

Old Pop really knew nothing, Murph said. Pop was just trying to protect a paying guest, that Red Lyons. He was the red-head—he'd been holing up here, paying Pop good money, hiding out from the John Laws on a horse-stealing charge.

Murphy was badly hit. He lay stretched out on a cot in that backroom, choking when they worked whisky between his lips. The Kid came out to see the battered terrified Pop about getting a sawbones. The little man shook his head; there wasn't a doctor within thirty odd miles.

Solo went over and examined the red-head, Lyons. He was a plumb dead snake, undoubtedly cashing his chips within a matter of seconds after that bullet took him where his ear had been. It baffled the Kid because Lyons had been definitely out of the fight. Mort Royson's shadow fell along the floor beside Solo.

"Who got him?" the latter asked.

Royson nodded at the Kid, weak eyes blinking. Because he was slightly on the bony side, Royson looked more than his thirty years.

"I did?" Solo said. "Can't remember it at all."

"Must have been when you was spraying slugs all over the place," Royson said. "Murph hoped to take him back too."

Solo stood frowning as he tried to recall it. To him it was little short of incredible that he had gunned a man and didn't know it. He fingered the silver skull at his throat, suspended from the chin strings of his sombrero as Mort Royson studied him.

The Silver Kid was an innocuous-looking half pint of a rannyhan, garbed in rusty trail-stained black. Often, at first glance, men took him for a saddle tramp riding the grubline; then they noted the silver trappings of his rig and changed their minds. His black boots were old and cracked, but the spur rowels were fashioned from Mex silver dollars. His leather batwing chaps were brush-scarred, but the flaps were decorated with silver conchas; the butts of his twin .45 Colts of the same metal. His patched black shirt, double-breasted, boasted a twin row of silver buttons. The hatband of his weather-warped sombrero was studded with conchas of silver, too. And, finally, slung at his throat from his sombrero strings, was that minute silver skull; it was the last thing many men had seen on this earth.

Otherwise, he was boyish-looking with a pointed face and a pair of deceptively sleepy eyes. His ragged black hair had a trick of slipping down from beneath his hat over his forehead. He was small with a certain catlike quality when he moved. When he spoke, even in temper, it was with a strangely soft voice.

STILL baffled, the Kid went back into the room where Murphy lay, told him he'd hit the leather and get that doctor as soon as he could. But the shot-up veteran badge-packer shook his head, clawing at the Kid with a feeble hand.

"No, Solo. I'd be dead afore you could git him back here," he said, voice husky with weakness. His life was ebbing, it was plain. "Just drag that Lyons back to Hogarth . . . for me. He's got testimony that can save

an innocent man from being hung up at State Prison. Make him talk, gun whup him if you have to. But—" Then he saw the look on Solo Strant's face.

There was no sense in keeping it from him. "Lyons had his light put out, Chan. . . . Seems like I did it, though I don't remember."

The deputy groaned and not with the pain of his own gunshot wounds. They worked some more whisky between his lips and he insisted on being propped up slightly as he fought for final strength. "I—I got a—a—st-story to tell you, Kid. It's terrible important. A man's life—it hangs on it." Murphy let his eyes flick over lean Mort Royson, the doomed man's cousin. There was cold scorn in his look.

"I'll do what I can, Chan," the Kid said as he built a quirly for the dying man at the latter's signal. He got it between Murphy's now pale lips and lighted it.

Puffing weakly, Chan Murphy launched into his tale. He himself was down from Hogarth on a strange kind of manhunt to save this Mack Royson. Mack Royson was now in State Prison, convicted of murder and sentenced to hang two weeks from date. "My superior officer, Sheriff Blanchard, sent him up. We both honestly thought he was guilty as blazes, Kid." Mack Royson had been charged with murdering one Lucas, Bet-A-Thousand Lucas, out on the trail beyond Hogarth, killing and robbing him. It was well known that Lucas, a heavy bettor, had been carrying almost eight thousand on him.

"Everything fitted," Chan Murphy went on weakly but grimly resolved to finish it. "There's a girl at the dance-hall." She had some Spanish blood, he said. Name of Juanita. Lucas had been trying to steal her from Mack Royson, to begin with. One of Lucas' friends said he saw Royson following the gambler, furtively, when he left town that night. The deputy broke off with a coughing spell.

The Kid, sitting on the edge of a chair, glanced at Mort Royson. The thin, sharp-featured man nodded agreement to the facts.

MURPHY went on, voice a shade weaker. "To clinch it— To clinch it, Mack Royson had been carrying a little more than seven thousand when picked up. . . . He had been tried, convicted, and sent to prison for execution.

"There was a brison break," the deputy continued. "And that's when Tom Blanchard and me got our doubts. The Royson ranny — this gent's cousin—he could uh got away with the others. It was a big break with a—a riot going on inside the prison." More than a score of men had gotten away and some of them were still on the loose. "But Royson didn't go."

Blanchard had sent Chan Murphy up there to investigate. "Royson . . . Mack Royson . . . he told me he had stayed instead of busting out be — because he knew he was innocent and would be cleared. A fella who is due to be hanged—he stayed."

Solo Strant nodded, getting the point. A guilty man with his head practically in a noose would have gone out, taking his chances.

"Then we found out something else, Kid. At his trial . . ." Mack Royson, protesting his innocence, had claimed to be out of town—said he had gone over to Whisky Hill, about five days ride away, to see about picking up a small outfit down there. He had ridden out of Hogarth without speaking of it to anybody. "At the trial, he claimed he'd met up with this Red Lyons—the late Lyons. . . ." He'd said he met the man where he was hiding out in the hills with a leg wound, that he learned Lyons was wanted for stealing horses. "We laughed at him when he told it at the trial. Said—said he'd made it up outa whole-cloth, a horse-thief and—"

Murphy broke off with weakness again, coughing feebly. They gave him some more whisky. He resumed. "When I came back from the State Prison, a new handbill for a criminal come in. It was for this Red Lyons. . . . Then—we—we knew he *had* exist-

ed." It had bolstered the convicted man's story.

Sheriff Blanchard was a seriously ill man, aged and laid up with pneumonia. But Murphy had taken over the case, convinced Mack Royson was innocent now. He had learned where Lyons had last been seen and finally, tonight, tracked him down. "I guess I'd been asking too many questions around about and some of his pards smelled trouble. . . . Anyway . . . you saw what happened."

The horse-thief had admitted meeting up with Royson as the latter had claimed. Mack Royson's description of him had been perfect. "I—I promised him protection if he'd come back and speak his piece. . . . But he lost his head. You heard him. And now—"

MURPHY'S graying face slumped. At his sides his big-knuckled fists knotted in bitterness and futility. Lyons was dead; Murphy himself was dying. And Mort Royson's testimony of what had occurred this night would be useless in court because of his relationship to the doomed man.

The Kid put more whisky to the deputy's lips. Then: "Well, what about the dance-hall girl, Juanita?"

Murphy groaned. Her testimony in court had helped convict Mack Royson. She'd sworn she'd seen him lurking about the night of the killing, though Royson himself claimed to be miles away.

"All right. Now you know Royson wasn't lying. If we get her and make her come out with truth and—"

Chan Murphy shook his head slightly. "She up and left Hogarth right after the conviction, plump disappeared. Nobody knows where she went to. . . . 'Nother smoke, please, Solo."

Mort Royson, sitting across the table, nodded as he just sipped at the whisky in his glass. "I myself tried to find her but—no luck." He had a bandana wrapped around his bullet-nicked hand.

Solo Strant felt like a murderer himself. It was a freak of Fate, had been accidental of course. Yet he had, apparently, blasted down the man who could have saved this Mack Royson's neck. Red Lyons, the one man, if he only could have been dragged back alive. . . .

CHAPTER III

MURPHY got talking again and the Kid found out he was mistaken about it being only *one* man. Mack Royson had testified at the trial that the reason he had so few reputable witnesses along the trail back from Whisky Hill was that he had been hunted, by whom or for what he had not been certain. But he claimed there had been a gunman named Ryerson who'd tried to kill him—an hombre with his right hand missing. Lefty Ryerson, he'd been called.

"We laughed at that too," Murphy said bitterly as he recalled it. But since he had taken the trail, he had discovered there was a man of that name who had been around Yucca City. "The word is he worked for Mike Staley there. Staley, maybe you know, is the boss behind the works in Yucca, Kid." Staley had done time as a killer and worked under cover now. They knew he was a bad one, that no lawless act occurred in Yucca without his say so; he pulled all the strings. But the Law could procure no evidence against him, was unable to hang the deadwood on him.

"Then this Ryerson could prove Mack Royson was way down the trail there in Yucca?" the Kid said eagerly though his Sphinxlike face remained impassive. He got a little more sleepy-eyed than customary as he weighed it. When Solo Strant got that sleepy-eyed look, he was dangerous.

Murphy nodded with great effort. "Yep. Ryerson could prove Mack was there the day before the killing—the 15th of last month—as he claimed he was. Yucca is too far from Hogarth. He never could have got back to Hogarth in one day, Solo. . . . But getting Ryerson to admit it—after having tried to gun Mack Royson — would be tough. Ver—" He had another coughing spell. A thin froth of blood bubbled at his lips.

"If you could find Ryerson," he got out thinly. "He—he seems to have vanished. The Law was after him too."

The Kid sucked on his coal of quirly. "Any idea of how he could be tracked down, Chan?"

Murphy lay back a little, shrugging faintly. "An hombre after Ryerson would have to go to Mike Staley. He—he'd have to pose as being outside the Law, I reckon."

There were several long seconds of heavy silence. Mort Royson, the cousin, cleaned a finger-nail with a splinter of matchstick. Outside the rain spattered down with an eternal dismal sound. It was grisly with them knowing that Chan Murphy was dying.

The Kid nodded curtly. "All right. If Ryerson can't be found. . . ."

MURPHY said, "They's one other. That's where Mack explained that mess of dinero he had." His voice faded out and they dosed him with more redeye. A cold wind had begun to sough around the building.

Murphy gathered himself and went on. Mack Royson's story about the money—which, though it had sounded ridiculous at the time, they were inclined to believe now—was that he had stopped in Yucca Bluffs City. That was its formal name. He had put up at the hotel, but by a coincidence, he had not been registered there because it had been full up; so he had no evidence there. A horse trader had offered to let him share his room gratis. Mack Royson had never known anything but the man's first name, Bill; there was no way of tracing him.

This Bill was a great monte addict and had left, never to be seen by Mack again, early in the evening. A short while later, according to the doomed man's story, he had heard muffled shots in the building. Then there had been fleeing footsteps in the hallway, and a wounded gent had come into the room, limping, gun out. It had been hard to tell much of him because his coat collar was turned up beneath a jerked-down sombrero, and his features were blurred by beard stubble. He'd had an oilcloth-wrapped package under one arm.

He had only remained a matter of seconds, said he was being hunted by killers and that they wanted what he had in the package. He'd asked Mack Royson where he was headed for. When Mack said Hogarth, the little stranger had replied he'd meet him there in two weeks, asked the naive astounded Mack his name, then grabbed up a piece of paper and scrawled something on it.

"I reckon it sounds plumb locoed," Murphy said with difficulty, breath wheezing laboriously in his throat. He was bleeding inside. "That gent shoved the package under the bed and shoved the paper at Mack. Then he ran out on the balcony and vanished. He had stopped a moment to explain the package meant life and death to somebody, and to turn it over to whoever appeared and knew what was written on the paper. "That—that-t was all. Sounds clean locoed, don't it-t?"

The Kid nodded, then paused as his quick-thinking mind caught up with things. "Mebbeso—then mebbe not, Chan. A guilty man would uh cooked up a better windy than that one to explain the dinero."

MORT ROYSON nodded, and Murphy did. "That's what I figured out later. Here. . . ." He probed inside his shirt and brought out a much-thumbed scrap of paper already yellowing. It was the paper the man with the package had given Mack Royson.

The Kid took it. On it were printed two words. "The Friend." No more. But beneath was a small hasty drawing of a Mexican-style sombrero.

"And Royson brought back the package. It contained all the dinero, eh?"

Murphy nodded. He said it was in bills of a hundred dollars and some larger. "But he didn't know what was in it then. He said at the trial that the hunted man seemed honest and sin-sincere. He—" Murphy half choked.

"He thought of turning it over to

the John Laws there," Mort Royson put in in his dry colorless voice, helping out with the story for the first time. "Then he found out an hombre had been killed behind the hotel and decided to keep quiet. After all, he was a stranger there. Mack was always one to believe in folks—and want to help them out."

The Kid noted that Mort Royson spoke of his cousin in the past tense, as if he were already dead.

Murphy, fading fast, finished up. Mack had always figured, he said later, that he could turn the package over to the sheriff in Hogarth where he was somewhat known. He had been in Hogarth about six-seven weeks.

"Seems like—'cording to his story—the package had just broke open when we nabbed him out on the trail. He swore he had no idea it held all that dinero." Murphy clutched at the sides of the cot as a fresh spasm of pain gripped him. "We laughed at him in—in court . . . and sent an innocent man to be hung. Ah-h, Gawd!"

Mort Royson spoke again. 'It was after he got the package, he said, that this Ryerson tried to gun him twice. . . . That raised his stubborn streak and he swore to get it through to Hogarth."

The Kid studied him with that deceptively sleepy look. 'You see your cousin after he got back—before the Law got him, fella?"

Mort Royson shook his head. The Kid had another query.

"You think your cousin's innocent?"

"He's innocent as sure as the sun rises," Murphy cried thinly. "He could uh escaped from prison—b-but didn't, Kid."

MORT SHOOK his head sadly. "I wanted to help him—but I don't see what can be done now. Me, I'm not much shakes with a hogleg myself." His eyes shifted to the dying Murphy. "And getting to this Ryerson—or learning where he is through this Mike Staley. . . ." He shrugged his discouragement. "—I came along, of course, to do what I could."

Chan Murphy stretched a hand from the cot toward the boyish-faced Solo. "Solo, fella, if you could help out . . . th-there—there ain't nothing much m-more I can do . . . Blanchard—he's a s-sick man. We—we d-did an awful wrong and—" Agony twisted his sunken face.

And the Kid fingered the tiny silver skull at his throat. He too had done a wrong in silencing Red Lyons forever. He gripped Chan Murphy's hand. "Depend on me, Murph. I'll go to Yucca Bluffs. If it's possible. . . ."

Chan Murphy's eyes had already closed. The breath rattled in his throat. In another ten minutes he had breathed his last.

The Kid made arrangement with old Pop to get word to Hogarth about the deputy sheriff's body. Then, after an hour of hurried shuteye, as the first streamers of dawn yellowed the sky, he rode down the trail for Yucca Bluffs. He was more surprised than anything else that the colorless Mort Royson rode with him. . . .

CHAPTER IV

IT WAS going to be an extremely difficult assignment, Solo Strant realized. A man like this Mike Staley was no ordinary, run-of-the-line outlaw. It wouldn't be like going into a place and working yourself into the bunch of some long-rider, holed up in the hills like a common lobo, who couldn't think any further than a trigger. A Staley, maintaining a front of respectability, would be hard to insinuate himself with. And the Kid knew little about Yucca Bluffs aside from the fact that the big Bearpaw cow outfit was located just outside it.

As he recalled, a man named Grace ran the Bearpaw. He asked Mort Royson about it. "Yes, I believe that *might* be his name, Grace," Royson admitted. He was never sure about anything. "I don't think we'll get anywhere on this trip," he added, "Ryerson seems to have dropped from sight."

"You can always cut a man's sign somehow," the Kid said determinedly. He was walking poison when it came to meting out justice that the Law seemed unable to do, though he never pinned on a badge himself. To him, it was equally bad that an innocent man should die for somebody else's crime, and Chan Murphy had convinced him of Mack Royson's innocence. Hard-headed Murph wouldn't have been out on this needle-in-a-haystack hunt on a mere hunch.

"Murphy didn't mention it—didn't get time, I reckon," Mort Royson said thoughtfully. "But the rumor is that Ryerson was burned down in a gunfight."

The Kid's lips tightened as the rising sun began to dry out the earth. If that were so, that would leave but one final alternative: this mysterious figure who'd signed himself merely, "The Friend." And there was no real clue to who he was. The only thing Solo could figure there was that the dinero, that eight thousand, had probably been stolen.

"Nope. 'Fraid we're on a wild goose chase, Kid," Mort said wearily.

"Nothing to keep you from turning around," Solo suggested.

Mort's watery-hued eyes jumped, then became guarded in his head. "Oh, I'll see it through. For Mack's sake, anyway. But he always was a one for getting into queer scrapes. Yes-siree."

THEY RODE through that day and camped in a little arroyo that night. Mort kicked at spending a night on the ground, but the Kid overrode him coldly. Just as a matter of caution he didn't want anybody cutting his sign before he reached Yucca Bluffs. He had already bought himself a gray shirt, to displace the black one with the silver buttons, and a gray flat-brimmed Stetson to wear in lieu of his battered black one with the curled brim. The discarded gear he had put in his saddle roll, and he had removed the silver skull from his throat, all telltale signs that would reveal his identity to hombres who had even heard of him. For in many parts of the country, the Kid was a legend.

He didn't think much of Mort Royson. Not that there was anything wrong about Mort, the hairpin admitted to being a bank teller back in Hogarth. There was something bloodless about him, though. He had a cautious tread-lightly quality, something lily-livered, that would never have belonged to a gent who had ever ridden the out-trails.

Early the next morning, they pushed on, skirting Wagon Tongue Creek and rounding an elbow of the bluish Little Horse hills. The Kid was still wondering how he'd operate when he got into Yucca Bluffs when they sloped into a small range town. It was just a couple of lines of paint-peeling, boxlike stores and houses strung along a wider strip of the trail. They got down at the General Store, Solo needed some fresh shells.

Inside there were a couple of loungers. A rancher stood at the counter, tolling off items from a long list of supplies on a piece of paper. The proprietor pottered about. There was going to be quite a wait. Sauntering about, the Kid saw a girl eating at a table in an alcove where the owner served grub. It was hard to tell much about her as she bent over her plate. She was black-haired, with a dark olive complexion, but she was haggard with fatigue and her clothes powdered with trail dust. Mort Royson came along, gave a start.

Solo swung on him, but Mort was looking over a shoulder toward the front of the store. "One of those gents up there just said something. He—he sounded so much like poor Mack I thought it was a ghost." He fired up a tailor-made cigaret. "Poor Mack. . . ."

A few moments later, fidgeting nervously, he said he would amble down the line for a drink. "That voice gave me a right bad shock." He went out.

The Kid waited while the cowman completed his list with a load of rock salt for the water-holes. Then

there was the job of baling it up.

One of the loungers said, "See that bunch of riders come in a while back, Jeb? They was a posse. I kin always tell by the cut of their jib."

"WONDER who they're looking for?" said the other.

Finally the Kid stepped up and ordered his shells. The front door opened with a bang. Solo had just noticed that the girl was gone from the alcove, leaving half her plate of chow unfinished. He gazed idly at the five-six gents who marched in, then noted the deputy's star on the vest of one. That one ambled by him, squirting tobacco juice like a man with no particular business at hand. Solo reached for the shells being passed over the counter.

The next instant a round hard thing he knew for a gun muzzle hit him in the back like a blow, and the four others up front were hauling gun irons.

"Just freeze," said the deputy behind him gruffly. "I can uncock this hogleg afore you can breathe once—the last time!"

The Kid was dumfounded for an instant, then he smiled sleepily. "What's the joke, amigos? Did I tie my horse at the wrong place?"

"By grab, you did when you robbed the Yucca National last month, Devons!" snorted one of the four.

Solo started to speak but the deputy punched the gun muzzle deeper into his kidneys. "Put your dew-claws atop your skypiece, Devons! We know you're dangerous! One false move. . . ."

"You locoed?" the Kid said, obeying, icy-nerved. "I ain't Devons! My handle is Strant, Solo Strant. How about my sack of makin's, boss?" he said to the storekeeper.

His very coolness made them doubt for a moment. He recalled a reward handbill, now, that he had seen posted back on the trail. It had offered a thousand dollars, dead or alive, for a man known as Ralph Devons—wanted in a killing. He had been described as small-sized and dark. The Kid wondered for a moment where Mort Royson was.

One of the posse pointed a finger at the bruise that showed in a lump on Solo's temple. It was from the bottle flung at him in the gun ruckus back at Horseshoe Bend.

"Sure, it's him, Devons. Look! He's still got the mark where he was hit by a gun barrel when he tried to hold up that gambling house in Cactus Flats three days ago!"

The Kid tried to argue, but saw it would be useless. The deputy reached around to relieve him of one of his holstered smoke-wagons. "We'll take you in and hold you for a spell till we see, anyways. Easy—fella!"

The Kid was thinking of Mack Royson in State Prison and how little time there was. He couldn't be locked up in a cuartel now. "Mind if I get my tobacco," he said quietly in that extra soft voice. His hand went out across the counter. There was an open bag of flour standing there.

THE NEXT instant he had a fistful and hurled it over his shoulder into the deputy's face. As the latter sputtered and stumbled backward in surprise, Solo jack-knifed. The triggered bullet blazed over his head into some cans on the shelves behind the counter. In a flash, the Kid had that half-pulled hogleg loose and crackling. He sent two-three slugs ripping around the boots of the rest of the posse up front.

Wheeling, he ducked behind a barrel, darted around a packing case, then whisked through the doorway behind the store. The very daring surprise of his action had thrown them off. They thought they had their man as good as hogtied. He found himself in the kitchen of the living quarters. A bullet from the store itself drilled a hole in a dish-pan hanging on the back wall. But, gambling, Solo Strant ducked and raced for the back door beside it. It was a screen door.

Green bottle flies buzzed angrily as he threw it open to hurtle out. He was bent over. He only saw the blur of a moving body waiting just outside the door. Before he could pivot,

the gun barrel slapped down and across his skull just under his hat line. He collapsed, out cold. . . .

WHEN HE came to, Strant was recaptured, of course. They had thrown a bucket over his head. And the deputy, Warren, was whacking him back and forth across the face with a heavy hand, hitting him so hard the Kid rocked from side to side in the chair. He could tell by the lack of weight at his waist that his smokepoles had been taken. He cursed Warren. The latter grabbed him by the hair and shook him savagely.

"Reckon Devons can sit a saddle now. Let's go, boys." The Kid's hat was slapped on his throbbing head, and with the thick-set warden leading the way, they went out. A few minutes later, the Kid, a prisoner, arms trussed behind him, was riding down the trail to Yucca Bluffs.

They arrived early in the evening, trailing down the doubling road that dropped from the bluff top into the town. The Kid could see that it was a big, prosperous range town with the coal-oil torches of many business places glowering at the entrances along the main street. Horses and rigs filled every hitchrail. From the bluff road he had been able to make out the ribbon of creek on the other side, too.

Two trails angled into the place from the south, and another ran northward along the base of the bluff. They passed a freshly painted white meeting house. Further along the road a small church steeple poked at the night sky. Then they went by the impressive front of the Yucca National and Cattlemen's bank and turned into a side street. Here there even had been some tents thrown up as business establishments till building could catch up with the demand. There was a small throng outside one that was labelled a fortune teller's. Little notice was given the prisoner, Solo Strant.

ON THE way in he had learned that Warren was special deputy to the town marshal, Eckert. Yucca Bluffs was not a county seat, hence had no sheriff. The posse had been out looking for some rustlers when they had picked him up. Somebody, Warren said, had tipped them off back in that last town, claimed he knew Strant as Ralph Devons and had overheard him say he had a hand in the Yucca bank robbery. But when the Kid asked about the gent who had given that piece of misinformation, Warren had refused to say more.

They went up a long gentle rise toward a hill that lay to the north of the town. Just past a side alley and a burnt-out skeleton of house the jail stood. It was a two-story dobie place. A couple of seams, yellowed to a rusty shade with weathering, angled down the front of it. Heavy-barred windows stared sternly down at the street as the building was set up on a little shelf of land.

Then even the iron-nerved Kid could barely restrain a shudder as he saw that thing out to one side. It was a gallows platform with the right-angled arm of the gallows above it throwing a blood-chilling shadow in the glow of the rising moon. Warren had mentioned that Yucca Bluffs rodded its own law, had added they had the quickest acting juries this side of the Mississippi.

Inside in the office, the Kid was frisked again for a hideout weapon. "Well, you wanta confess and make things simple?" Warren asked.

Solo sneered back at him even though he knew the brutal acting Warren might strike him again. "Confess to what. You ain't got the sense of little apples, Warren. I told you once I'm Strant, Solo Strant. Some folks know me as the Silver Kid."

"Uh-huh. And I'm Bat Masterson. We got nice cells and never run short of hemp rope in this town yet, Devons."

The Kid tried to tell Warren about Chan Murphy the deputy, and about his boss, Blanchard, up Hogarth way, who knew who he, the Kid, was. Warren shrugged.

"Take time to check on that, Devons. We got a rider going that way; we might do it. Meantime we'll round

up the witnesses. That'll take a little time. But if you'd confess now, you might save ourself from a hempen necktie, Devons."

Solo shook his head. There was no point in any more tongue-wagging. He was taken upstairs and put in a cell.

BURNING UP one quirly after another, he paced for a spell, quivering in futile rage. He knew the Warren type of badge-packer. Out to make a rep for himself, he'd rope in anybody short of the state governor in person. "Not that they can actually do anything to me," the Kid said half aloud once. But it was the loss of precious time.

He finally dropped down on the bunk in a corner, head throbbing blindingly. He supposed he could only wait and hope for the best, a release in short order. Riding in he had mentioned Ryerson's name casually, but Warren had shaken his head blankly; he didn't know the man. The Kid thought of Mort Royson, but he didn't figure on much help from that quarter; the over-cautious half-scared Mort had probably ducked when he saw the posse taking him.

Just before he dozed off, he heard somebody enter below. The voices carried up the stairs. The newcomer said to Warren he'd heard he had brought in a new prisoner. "Yep," bragged the deputy marshal. "Ralph Devons, the gunman an' bank robber! Figure he'll stretch rope right soon, too!"

"Devons, eh," said the other. "Can't say I ever heared of him. . . . Nope, that name don't mean nothing to me."

There was some more talk and the other went out. But the Kid, propped on an elbow, was rubbing his neck where the silver skull would usually hang. Even without seeing the face of that stranger, he had caught the ring of insincerity in his blatant voice. The hombre had been lying when he said the name Devons meant nothing to him. . . .

CHAPTER V

IT WAS the arrival of another prisoner that woke the Kid. "Get in there, ya orey-eyed barroom tramp!" the jailer was saying as he shoved him into the cell across the corridor from the Kid's. Then the jailer went away with his lantern. The only illumination was from a small lamp hanging at the back end of the corridor over the stairs.

Solo sat on the edge of the bunk, trying to add up things. It was imperative that he get out shortly. If he could only get in touch with that chicken-hearted Mort Royson somehow.

The new prisoner called over, "Hey, mister, you the bank robber?"

Rising, the Kid went over to the door of his cell. The front of the cell was solid stone but the door was iron with a grille of bars at head height. Only faintly could he make out the beard-stubbled, sly-eyed face across the way in the dim light. "No."

"Ain't you that Ralph Devons, fella?"

"They say I am but I'm not."

The other snickered. "Reckon you are—and will be—if they says you are, Devons."

It didn't make sense. One of the men who'd been in the posse came up and slid a pint of redeye through the grille of the newcomer's cell. "There you are, Ossie. Now get yourself a snootful of that and go to sleep."

There was the gurgle of drinking from the bottle in the other cell. The Kid found himself pacing again. Then the Ossie one called across again, snickering some more.

"If you didn't pull the bank job, ya should uh, Devons!"

The Kid bridled though his poker face showed nothing. "They can't do anything to me; they can't prove I did it, by grab!"

Another snicker. Ossie said, "Leave it to them. They will be able to prove it. Warren and his boss, Eckert, they ain't knowned as the 'Hanging Lawmen' for nothing." He hoisted the bottle again, sleeving his

chin when he finished. "Shucks, I'm one of the witnesses against you, Devons! He-he!"

"What? You never saw me rob this bank!"

"Don't know as I know exactly what I did see. . . . Just saw a gent fooling around behind it. Never did get a real good look at him." He consulted the bottle again. "But when they face me with ya in the morning—and that Warren says you're the fella—I guess I'll just have to recognize you real good."

SOLO wondered if the man was locoed. A cold feeling began to wriggle down his spine. It wasn't nice. "You're haywire!"

"He-he!" The face across the way swayed behind the grille and the hombre caught at it to steady himself. "Not so crazy I don't aim to save my own hide, by gum! He-he! They got an old hoss-stealing charge agin me. I don't testify the way Warren wants—and I'm in trouble. Naw, thanks. My neck is too danged ticklish about ropes."

The Kid became aware of the cold sweat on his forehead. At first, he didn't believe it. "You can't send an innocent man to the gallows!"

That got Ossie for a moment. He put his hands together and lifted his eyes heavenward. Then he had another slug from the fast-emptying bottle and shrugged. "Look, Devons," he said hoarsely. "How do I know you *didn't* do it? How? Warren says you did. Mebbe you did. 'S all I know. And I ain't agoing to die. Nosiree. Not for nobody. So, I reckon it—it's your hard luck."

The Kid got an iron grip on himself. He had ridden many an outtrail, had bedded down and grubbed with more than a few denizens of the owlhoot. He knew men could be cruel, were avaricious, often vicious when tempers exploded. But man's calculated cruelty to man still surprised him at times. Here he was due to stretch rope, though innocent, because somebody had whispered a lie about him. And a chunk-headed John Law, sold on the idea he was the guilty party had dug up an orey-eyed, coerced witness.

Ossie, staring across at him, had a moment of solemnity. "Ya don't understan', Devons. They's been a heap of killings and hold-ups and robberies in Yucca Bluffs. The town marshal was elected to stamp 'em out. He and Warren figure if they's enough hangings, the lawless pack'll pull stakes and move on. *Sabe?*"

"Oh, sure," the Kid said sarcastically. "That makes it much easier. Much."

The other peered, owl-eyed at this stage of his drinking. He felt some sorry for the Kid. "Look. I know how you can beat it. Two ways."

"How?"

"You know Mike Staley? Or maybe you're a frien' of a frien' of his'n. Then you git word to Mike and you'll be outa here. See?"

"I don't know Mike Staley." That was bitter, for Staley was a man he had hoped to know.

Ossie said, "Well, then they's the Bearpaw outfit. Susan Grace, she's the owner. You're known by the Bearpaw—and you'll be outa here!" He snickered some more. "That Bearpaw bunch—they don't let the Law bother them none."

"A girl?" the Kid said.

"Well, she's the owner, that Miss Susan. Adam Grace, her uncle, he rods it for her. You know them—and you're as good as free. Law—it don't mean nothin' to 'em."

AS HE lighted a fresh brain-pill, Solo Strant didn't bother to answer. He didn't know the Bearpaw or the Graces either. Ossie, eyelids sagging, mentioned something about the Graces having a pack of gunslicks on their spread. His head bumped against the grille. A few minutes later and there were stumbling footsteps and the Kid heard the drunken tramp drop onto his bunk.

Solo did some stall-walking, cudgeling his brains to figure some way out, but he realized there was none. His number was up and his light was due to be put out. There was just a chance that Mort Royson might hap-

pen along, or that the hanging lawmen might check with the sheriff at Hogarth to learn who he was. And he wouldn't have given a dobie dollar for either of those chances. He had sloped in, hoping to save a man doomed to hang. Instead, now, he himself was—

He shut off the thought. Pulling off his boots, he rolled into his bunk. Icy-nerved, soon he was asleep. . . .

* * *

Strant didn't know what woke him that time, he only knew it was late. The general sound of revelry from the main street had died. Through his cell window he could see that the black of sky was already washed with gray. Ossie's heavy snoring came from the opposite cell. The Kid's keenly-tuned ears caught the tinkle of bridle bits; the sound came from the rear of the jailhouse. Then the voices, hushed but clear, floated up from downstairs.

"Com'on, Josh, You're letting me in and turning over the cell keys. They's a dawg we aim to drag outa here!" That voice was very muffled. It seemed to come out of the night itself.

"I can't do it, Sudden," said the jailer's hushed voice. "I'd lose my job. I—"

"You can lose more than your job, Josh," the muffled voice snapped. "You know what the boss has got on you. And the evidence too."

"But, Sudden, listen. I—"

"Open up, Josh. We'll make things look all right. Eckert's outa town, and that Warren is down snoring away at the hotel. Come on or the boss pulls the strings, Josh. You know what'll happen."

The Kid realized that the muffled-voiced speaker was outside, at the back door of the jail-house. Then a bar was lifted and the door hinges creaked faintly on the night. There was the slither of several pairs of boots entering. The jailer mouthed some protest, swallowed it on a groan. And there was the thud of a limp body going down.

Then boots came up the stairs.

THE KID could hardly believe it as they clumped down to his cell and a face peered in the grille. Somebody said the other one, Ossie, was all right; he was dead drunk, dead to the world. "You!" the face at the grille said to the Kid. Then the key scraped in the heavy lock. The door was pulled open to reveal three men with drawn guns.

One of them was a big, half-bald hombre. His right arm had been cut off above the elbow. A soiled bandage showed inside the pinned-up sleeve of his checkered shirt. He stepped inside confidently with the air of a man who always holds the winning cards even if they have to be up his sleeve. His eyebrows were so sun-bleached it looked as if he lacked them entirely—which gave him a certain snaky look. But he had a soft smile.

"Come on, fella," he said, footing aside the plate with the Kid's untasted dinner. "We're taking a little pasear."

Baffled, the Kid shrugged and pulled on his new gray sombrero and obeyed. He didn't know what the game was, but any way out of that jail couldn't be worse.

At the bottom of the stairs, t[illegible] were two others. They like the rest aside from the soft-smiling one, had that wolf-eyed look, the cold guarded faces. The Kid recognized it only too well: professional gun hawks.

One of them held Solo's gun belts with the holsters containing the twin silver-stocked Colts. He had taken them from the front office. Now he stepped across the body of the paunchy jailer, who had been batted down by a gun barrel in the rear corridor.

"These your hoglegs?" he said to the Kid. "Shucks, I always thought you toted white-stocked equalizers. Me, I'm crazy for some ivory-butted guns." He didn't give them to the Kid who was playing his cards close to his chest. Actually, he didn't know what his cards were yet.

"Somebody's coming, Sudden," said one of them. The half bald, one-armed one snorted disdainfully and strode toward the office where a low-

turned lamp burned. A key jarred in the lock of the front door and a figure stepped in, pulling off his hat. The Kid recognized him as one of the possemen, the one with the crooked broken nose.

"Why, hello—" He started. Solo couldn't hear the rest.

THEN BIG Sudden, gun covering him, walked purposefully onto the man. The latter hadn't seemed too alarmed at first. Sudden said heavily, "Too bad you had to happen in right now, Joe. Now—you've seen too much." Then he jammed the smokepole into the posseman's chest and triggered a moment after he shoved the door closed with a slam.

It was like that, one of the most cold-blooded things the experienced Kid had ever seen. The posseman went down, half over an armchair. The blood spurted only briefly from his blasted chest for he was already dead. The whites of his opened eyes rolled up and his fallen hat rolled like a cartwheel around the office cuspidor. It was all over.

"That shot—maybe somebody heard it and—"

The ever-calm Sudden looked back into the hallway and shook his head. "Naw. I muffled it smack against his body. 'Sides, the door slammed about the same instant. Let's ride."

They went out the back where their horses waited, one of them tossing the cell key into the bushes. The Kid saw his own rugged paint pony had been saddled up and taken from the horse shed. These gents seemed to think of everything. Nobody rushed around; they had a terrible calmness.

Sudden tapped the Kid's arm with his gun when they were mounted. "Don't go blatting around—I mean, yelling—or you'll get your light put out. . . . All right."

They rode out past the grisly gallows beside the jail-house and turned up the side road away from town. Halfway up the slope, a man in a lighted doorway watched them pass. One of the lobos waved jauntily to him. A little further on they met a rider coming in the other direction. Hands edged stealthily to gun butts.

"Out late tonight, Bob, ain't you? Better hurry home to mama," one of the riders jeered. They went on over the rise. Instinct told the Kid then he was with men more dangerous than red-eyed, hog-wild killers.

HALF a mile on they turned into a dry gully and moved westward in it. Sudden spoke and they reined up while one dropped off. On hands and knees, he put his ear to the ground. Rising, he shook his head. "Nobody coming." They continued.

The gully flattened out and they moved among sand-hills with the wind twitching at their sombreros. They seemed to be meandering at a gallop, swinging right and left in apparent aimlessness. Sudden called out and they cut straight to the west. The underfooting changed to patches of browned grass. They took a cow track through a big spread of chaparral, the black stalks brushing at their stirrups. Then they were moving across range and onto a trail veering northward. It was half light now with a roseate flush blooming over the low mounds of hills to the east. The Kid still had no idea what the game was.

There was a fork. A signpost at a weary angle, pointing up the left branch, read, "Bearpaw Outfit." They went that way, over a sharp rise and drew up inside of a hundred yards. Off to the right of the trail was a small hollow, bare except for three-four half dead pines. Sudden rode down to them and pinched out his cigaret, putting the stub in his shirt pocket. He was markedly deft and swift-moving for a one-armed gent. He blinked in the first rays of the rising sun.

"Going to be a right pretty day, all right." And one of the men pulled a looped rope from his saddle horn. Sudden sidled over to the Kid and jerked off the Kid's sombrero and slung it away. "All right. Git down and drag off your boots, fella. This is goodbye—for you."

The Kid put on a cool grin, meas-

uring the men and positions of their holsters about him. "What in blazes is this, Sudden?"

Sudden tugged at him to get him out of the hull. "Git your damned boots off, Devons! When Mike Staley leaves a man dead, he's always found with his boots off. That's a sign to the other buzzards that Staley always pays off and settles the score! Now—"

"I'm not Ralph Devons," the Kid cut in. "My name is Strant. I—"

"You're Devons!" one of the riders spat. Then gave him a shove that tipped him half out of the kak. The Kid dropped lightly to the ground and two of them were immediately down and covering him. They were slick uns, not getting so close he could make a grabbing play.

Solo started to speak again. But Sudden, out of the saddle too, hit him on the side of the head with a heavy fist. "Don't lie!" he spat. "You're Devons. The John Laws knew you. And you shot Tex Smitten, one of our boys, up at the Landing—gunned him in the back too. Witnesses saw you do it. Now git them boots off! You're a-going to be a cottonwood apple, Devons!"

There was a soft hiss as one of the men snaked the rope over a limb of the nearest pine.

CHAPTER VI

THE SUNLIGHT was brightening. It was a beautiful morning on which to have to die. At least, back in the jail, there was some chance of being cleared before he was strung up. Looking at the hardcase hairpins about him, the Silver Kid knew there was none here. He sat down and began to draw off his boots. He understood the gesture; it left a gent no self-respect as he cashed his chips.

"You say this is being done by Mike Staley's orders," he said matter of factly.

There was silence save for the man adjusting the noose. Then Sudden shrugged. "Don't know why we shouldn't tell you. You won't be doing no more chin-wagging soon—not this side of Hell, anyways. Sure. Staley's the big potato who runs the show in Yucca Bluffs. You killed one of his boys—the bad way. Staley always settles, Devons."

Solo wiggled his toes in his stocking feet. He knew that in a few seconds he was going to make a play for somebody's gun. A desperate play, too desperate to succeed; men of this breed made no mistakes. But it would be better than allowing himself to be meekly strung up like a sack of flour.

"Sorta funny," he remarked. "And I was sloping this way to see Staley. The joke's on me, ain't it, *Amigos?*" He was deadly calm but he could feel the sweat trickling down beneath his gray shirt. There was a strong gusty wind out of the south, cold too. But he was hot.

Nobody bothered to ask him about what he wanted to see the boss. Sudden said if he had any praying to do to make it short. One of them grabbed the Kid from behind as he started to rise. Then that one, using pigging strings, began to truss up his arms. There was going to be no chance for a play.

There was no warning save for the quick sharp clop of pony hoofs as they hit the trail. The party in the hollow swung around to see three riders breaking from the strip of woods on the other side of the trail, tearing down on them.

"Hoist them, you rotten murdering polecats!" cried one of them as they came on with drawn guns. It was a woman's voice. The next moment, the wind blew her sombrero back on her shoulders. She had hair like light beaten copper, parted in the middle and drawn back tightly to a bun at the nape of her neck. The wind too flattened her blue shirt against her body. And in that split second the Kid saw she was small and slim and coltish.

"Susan Grace!" blurted one of Sudden's men.

IT WAS Sudden himself, with cocked guns coming at him, who made the play with his lone left arm. He swooped and came up with a

cocked hogleg even as he flung sideward toward the bole of a pine. The guns of the charging trio rattled into action. The Kid heard a strangled oath behind him. It was the man who'd been about to truss him up; he'd jumped clear to draw himself. Then he was somersaulting halfway backward, his chest smashed in. He went rolling over and over into the bottom of the hollow.

Unarmed, Solo flung himself behind the scant protection of a piece of sagebrush. Lead whined around him as the horsemen poured it in; Sudden's bunch, taken aback, were triggering back frantically. For once their ironlike calm was shed. Another of them sank, hit in the leg. It was fierce and brief.

On all fours, the Kid scuttled up the side of the hollow parallel to the road. At the top there was a line of trees that would give him some protection. Without any hardware, he was helpless, unable to throw in against Sudden and his pack. Then one of the ponies came galloping up the side of the hollow too. The Kid caught at the bridle and, in his bootless feet, got a stirrup and hit the leather on the run. He looked over his shoulder in time to see one of Susan Grace's men pitch from his horse, hit. The man had been veering away from the direct fire, over toward the Kid.

There was one sharp shot in a lull. The Kid felt the animal under him shudder convulsively. It was going down, shot through the head. That Sudden was a deadly man who was not panicked easily, and a dead shot in the bargain. Solo got free of the stirrups just as the pony plunged onto its head. He was catapulted, twisting, through the air and landed on his back. The wind was shocked from his body and he lay helpless though perfectly conscious for several seconds—like one dead.

He saw the girl and her remaining horseman go driving up the side of the hollow right past him. And the Kid couldn't even cry out. They were beating a retreat, taking him for dead now. Lead flailed the air after them.

In a few moments, he recovered, unharmed. He saw the fallen Bearpaw hombre stretched in the grass over to his left, about ten yards further down. Bellying along, the Kid got to him and grabbed up the gun lying beside him, hooked his second Colts from the holster. Then he inched up slowly on his knees to look down among the pines.

His chance of escape died half born. A shot spattered on the settling stillness. The gun in his right hand was knocked flying through the air as a lucky bullet banged it in the barrel. The desperate Kid whipped toward the flat-topped rock whence gunsmoke drifted up. He snapped the trigger on his left-hand gun. It clicked hollowly on a spent shell; the weapon was empty!

The head and shoulders of the man back of the rock came up. He held a levelled Colts before him. "Claw sky, Devons! The boss said to hang you—and that's what we still aim to do!"

ONCE again the Kid had no alternative. Rising, he slung away the useless weapon in disgust. The man came over to march him back down to the hang-rope that still dangled. Sudden stepped out from behind a pine, swearing sullenly as he eyed the dead one of his party. The one wounded in the leg sat on the ground, knotting his neckerchief around the calf of his leg.

"Dang 'em! We're a'going to have to whip down that Bearpaw outfit yet! Don't give a hang what the boss says. But them two with the girl—they must be new uns on the outfit. Never saw either of 'em afore or—"

"Wait a minute!" Sudden strode toward the Kid, half bald head wrinkled in a frown. "You was just slinging two hoglegs up there when you tried to make a play."

The Kid said nothing. He felt like a fish in a rain barrel waiting to be shot, and he had about as much chance left. The man who had recaptured him nodded. "That's right,

Sudden! He had two but they didn't—"

Sudden stabbed a finger at the Kid as if finding him guilty of something new. "Maybe you ain't Devons, at that, by thunder! Devons toted two guns—but he never could sling two. He was too danged clumsy with his lift hand. I know that. Maybe—"

The Kid quietly grabbed at the opening. He told them to give him one of his gunbelts with the weapon emptied. When they did, he strapped it on, holster with protruding silver-stocked Colts on his right thigh. It was slung butt forward for a cross-arm draw. "Now follow my left hand —if you can," he said calmly. His body twisted around slightly as he stood at ease, relaxed. Then there was a blinding blur of action that seemed effortless. His left hand, every bit as fast as his right, swept across his body. And in the flick of an eyelid, the drawn gun was swinging up and in firing position.

One of them whistled softly. Sudden scowled.

"Naw, you ain't Devons, by thunder. We'll go see the boss about this. . . . Shucks, if we'd strung you up. Devons would uh gone scot free for the rest of his days!" He shook his head over that. That seemed to bother him.

After they had buried Sandy, the dead one, in a shallow grave under one of the pines, they remounted and swung back toward Yucca Bluffs. The Kid still wondered if he were dreaming. Fate again had taken an unexpected abrupt twist for him. . . .

* * *

MICHAEL STALEY lived in a fine three-story house about a mile down the westward trail outside of Yucca Bluffs. It was of wood, painted white, quietly impressive without being too large or opulent looking. It was the kind of a house a well-to-do, forthright citizen with a nice business in the city would have. They rode by it and turned down a little gully into some woods beyond it. Another turn to the right through the woods and they came to a big old saddle-backing barn sitting at the rear of Staley's property. It looked abandoned and unused; there was another smaller painted barn up closer to the house. They rode into the barn by a door on the woods side.

A man sat back on a kitchen chair propped against a stall inside. He had a shotgun beside the chair and wore two short-guns. He said hello to Sudden and asked where Sandy, the dead one, was.

Sudden said, "Poor devil'll never again try to fill an inside straight."

They dismounted and left their ponies there. Then they walked out the other side of the barn and headed up through the weeds. They went in the back door and into a room beside the kitchen. A Mex servant looked at them and Sudden went out with him, plucking at his bandaged stub of arm. He said it itched like crazy. Sudden was back in a few moments and motioned to the Kid. They went through the kitchen and into a dining room.

The Kid had met up with the bosses of outlaw outfits many times in the past. He had found them all manner of men, but he had never seen the chief of the gunman-underworld of a range town who lived like this. Sunlight streamed pleasantly in the dining room through curtained windows. The curtains were fresh and starched. The dining room table was covered with a pristine white cloth on which silver and glassware gleamed. On the walls were two large, gilt-framed portraits of what might be relatives. And in the living room beyond with its rich carpet he could see a mahogany piano standing catty-cornered.

Staley himself sat at one end of the table eating his breakfast, back to the kitchen. Unhurriedly he half-turned after they entered, looking up from a newspaper, *The Yucca Trumphet.* "Fella in here writes some real nice poetry," he mentioned to Sudden who looked blank. "Got one in this week about a gent riding under the moon and thinking of his girl. Reminds me of when I was young once. Hmmm. . . ." He nodded to the Kid. "You're Strant?"

THE Kid said "yes" as he studied the boss of Yucca Bluffs. Mike Staley was a tall, slim and straight-backed man. Over a lined face was carefully combed gray hair plentifully shot with pure white. He was garbed in neatly pressed black with a fresh white shirt and a little black bow tie. His slender, almost woman-like hands had a trick, Solo noticed, of always being in motion—not nervously, but unhurriedly and constantly, running over the table cloth, one fingering the rings on the other, possibly smoothing along a cigar. His face was thin, clean-shaven, the blue eyes telling nothing though seeming frank and open.

"Gambler's eyes," the Kid told himself.

Staley had a voice on the thin side and generally gave an air of fragility. That was until one rechecked on the mouth beneath the narrow nose. It was the striking characteristic of an ordinary-looking face. Wide, the lips were straight as a seam sliced by a knife blade. And when he pulled them taut across his yellowed teeth, they thinned to the narrowness of twin blades, became hard and white with bloodlessness. They were the tipoff on the inhuman ruthlessness of the man's character. They told of a man who brooked no interference and who never knew a qualm about how he struck down an enemy.

Somehow, when he tightened his mouth that way, it made Solo Strant think of a waiting wolf in the dimness of the night.

"Name yourself," Staley went on, forking up some eggs. "You got a first name to that handle . . . Strant." And the Kid saw his lips frame that last word again as if trying to recall where he'd heard it.

Solo thought fast. An hombre like Staley, highly intelligent, informed, would certainly know who he was and his rep as well. "Call me 'Gunner,' Gunner Strant." It was a name that had been tacked on him in the early days of his career down in the Washita. Folks had dubbed him "The Gunner."

The reflective, recollective light went out of Staley's eyes. He pointed to a chair and called to the Mex servant. "Sit down and eat some breakfast, Gunner Strant— anything you want. "You're my guest. My hospitality is not limited to hempen neckties."

The Kid fell to with a will to a mess of sizzling steak with fried eggs on the side, potatoes and a heaped dish of steaming corn bread. Staley asked no more questions while he ate, drawing out a cigar and smoothing the wrapper with his never still hands.

STANDING against the wall, Sudden spoke of the brush with Susan Grace and the Bearpaw hands. Staley only shrugged. "High-spirited miss, there."

"But ain't we going to do something about it. They killed Sandy and—" Sudden was glaring.

Staley's mouth made that somehow wolfish grimace, the lips becoming like a pair of white-edged knives. "I'll decide that. When I wish advice from you, you'll hear me ask for it. . . .A time will come for settling this and certain other things. Meanwhile, Sudden, you might let it get noised about the town that Bearpaw men did kill one of our boys."

"You mean, it'll get the Law after them?"

Staley made a deprecatory gesture wearily. "The Law? Please, Sudden, it's too early in the morning for bad jokes. But noise it about."

As a second cup of java was poured for the Kid and he lighted up a brain pill, Staley pointed his cigar at him. "Strant, because we almost strung you up by mistake, I don't know that we can let you go. It might be dangerous in more ways than one. Why you might even get the Law on us."

But Mike Staley wasn't fooling.

CHAPTER VII

THE KID'S alert mind was equal to the cat-and-mouse game though. He said, "If you always chow like this around here, I don't know why anybody'd want to

leave." Quirly smoke dribbled from his nostrils.

"You said you'd come here because you wanted to see me," Staley said. Sudden had repeated the Kid's conversation.

Again Solo improvised quickly. "Back in Hogarth, a gent was in a jam. Wounded in the leg and had a coupla personal enemies on his trail. He wanted to hop the train and borrowed fifty dollars from me. Said you'd pay me back for him. . . . Name of Hood, Eddie Hood."

"A tall fellow with yellow hair and a scar over his big nose?" said Staley. "Got a loud laugh, that Hood, too."

The Kid did not fall into the trap; he shook his head. "Can't be the same gent. This Hood is sawed-off and bald. No scar, either." Staley was deliberately describing another hombre, somebody in town, and would have produced him if Solo had bitten at the bait.

Staley lowered his eyes to light his cigar. "Let's retire to the living room, gents." In there he sat down before the piano. The restless hands moved over the keyboard. Sonorous chords rolled out. His eyes closed and he swung into something heavy and impressive. "Brahms," he mentioned off-handedly. "Strant, we now know you aren't Ralph Devons, but the John Laws must have had some reason for thinking you are."

The Kid answered above the music. He himself would have given a heap to know who had given Warren that deliberate misinformation. "Maybe I had good reason to let 'em think so for a spell when they picked me up," he parried.

Staley's hands crashed down on the keys. "Beethoven . . . He was near death when he wrote this." The music dropped. "Why, Strant?"

The Kid could match him card for card, trick for trick. "Shall we say a couple of U. S. marshals was making plumb nuisances of 'emselves? Jail on a false charge seemed like a right safe place for a while; nobody'd look for me there."

Staley chuckled, drawing on his cigar. He bent his head close to the keyboard as if to listen carefully as he replayed a few bars. "Knew I had it wrong last time. . . . What've the Federal officers got on you?"

The Kid stubbed out his smoke with an impatient gesture.

"Mr. Staley, the way I was brought up, questions, too many of 'em at least, was considered doggone bad taste."

Staley said nothing, playing on. Another crashing crescendo. He spun around on the stool. "You can handle a gun, Strant?"

SUDDEN answered for him, speaking with sullen honesty. He seemed to resent admitting what he said. "Only difference between him and a striking sidewinder is the sidewinder rattles before it strikes, boss." He scratched the stub of his right arm.

"It's a handy knack for a man to have," Staley said. "Very . . .Sometimes his life might even depend on it. Yes." He turned back to the piano and beautiful, soft music filled the room. "Schubert. . . .He died at thirty one. Unfortunate." He played more rapidly.

There was no forewarning. With the music, it seemed impossible to have detected any other soft sound. Staley's head had been bent reflectively over the keyboard again. Then he was tearing around, and from somewhere in his garments the Kid couldn't see whence his hand leaped with one of those new-fangled guns, a small revolver. Then it was spitting in the same instant.

Splinters leaped from the half-open door between the dining room and the kitchen. There were shouts. Ripping out his hogleg, Sudden leaped out the other end of the living room and down the hallway to the rear. The Kid seized a sheathed hunting knife hanging from the wall that he had noticed before.

It was explained quickly. One of the gunhands from the back room, getting curious, had slipped to the edge of the kitchen door to hear what was being said to the Kid. Staley gave him a tongue lashing, came back and closed the keyboard of the piano with a slam of annoyance. It seemed

incredible that he could have detected the man's presence as he played with his back half-turned toward that kitchen door. Impressed, Solo Strant put it down to some sixth sense.

Staley picked up his cigar and measured the Kid through a cloud of blue smoke. Then he smiled slightly. "Yes, you're a gunman. I can read the stamp of it on a gent. Smell it, maybe. I can always use a good man to—to protect my business interests, Strant." He made an aside about how Yucca Bluffs was a rough raw town in which to try to conduct business affairs. "Two hundred a month with bed and board free interest you, Strant?"

Again the Kid played his cards cannily, restraining any sign of eagerness. "Well-l," he hesitated. "It sounds pretty good—if I could draw something against my salary. I'm right flat now."

Staley drew out a wallet, plucked five tens from it, and gave them to the Kid. "I'm not worried about you taking a runout powder, Gunner. No man living has double-crossed me—except that Devons." He meant that those who had were dead.

"How about Warren and the Law here? I broke jail and—"

Staley held up his hand. "You aren't Ralph Devons, are you? All right, we know that. I shall see that the law officials are informed of it—and convinced of it. Think no more of that."

SOLO pretended to be awed. It was actually breath-taking that this king of the Yucca underworld could handle the Law like that. "All right. Where does the bunch work from?" It looked as if his luck had changed. Once he got with Mike Staley's outfit, it should be a simple matter to pick out Lefty Ryerson, the man with the missing right hand. And according to the late Chan Murphy's deathbed story, Ryerson had known who the now condemned Mack Royson was, calling him by name once when he tried to gun him. If he could get Ryerson, the Kid was figuring, and drag him back to Hogarth in time—

" 'Bunch'?" said Staley as if amused. "We don't have a 'bunch,' Gunner. I simply have men in my employ. Understand?"

He gave the Kid a brief picture of the situation. He, Staley, operated *The Lucky Oasis*, a gambling hall. It was a respectable place with the games run on the square. The Kid was to learn later that this was quite true, too. He also had a General Store at the creek side of the town, and a half ownership in a livery barn.

"But if a man didn't have some protection in this town, he would find himself out of business *pronto prontito*, Gunner. A man can also, unfortunately, have enemies. I do not depend on the blind Law to protect me from them. The Law, strangely, takes no steps till your enemy has struck. . .You can stay at the Reilly Brothers Bar. They have good food and rooms upstairs. I will arrange things with them." Which meant, the Kid knew, that Staley owned that place too. "It's clean, too," Staley added. "You'll get orders from Sudden."

It had been put so smoothly Solo was blinking mentally for a moment. Staley made it sound so convincing the Kid was almost fooled into believing it. Then he remembered what the orey-eyed Ossie had told him in the jail-house, and how Chan Murphy had sworn Staley pulled all the strings in Yucca Bluffs.

"All right." There was no handshake to seal it. Staley gave a curt nod, walked coldly past him and went up the hall stairs.

"Come on," said Sudden. "And remember—' 'He cut his eyes at Solo. "—*I* give the orders. . ."

* * *

THE Kid walked along Yucca Bluffs' main street in the hot sun, squinting through the powdered haze of dust churned from the road. He had already gotten his room at the Reilly Brothers Bar, washed and shaven and had two quick drinks. Also a couple of hours of shuteye. With his amazing recuperative powers, he was as good as new. He didn't

know what his next move was as yet.

It seemed as if it had to be a waiting game. Sooner or later he would encounter others on Staley's payroll. One of them might be Ryerson, if he were still in town.

He turned into Staley's place, *The Lucky Oasis*. Staley himself sat back at one of the green-topped tables chatting with a white-haired man. The latter had a drink. Staley had a pot of coffee in front of him; he had never been seen to take a drink. Outside of a table where a quiet game of stud was in progress, play had not begun yet. The faro wheel was covered up. Solo went to the bar and ordered a drink. The man beside him looked up and their eyes met in the mirror. It was loud-mouthed Warren, the deputy marshal. Warren dumped down the rest of his drink, spat, and walked out without a word.

The Kid listened in on the conversation on the other side of him. Two men were discussing the bank robbery that had happened last month. Solo had heard it mentioned before as he moved about the town, trying to get the lay of the land. Apparently the National and Cattlemen had been wiped out clean, lock, stock, and barrel.

"They ain't got the ones who did it yet, have they?" said one of the speakers.

"Nope. Had a fella up to the jailhouse they claimed was the one, but he's gone. And now it seems he weren't one of 'em anyway, from the story." The second gent snorted angrily. "Got a hunch they ain't never going to get the ones who pulled it either, by grab!"

"Well, we uns was lucky. Sure was mighty decent of Adam Grace to pay us off half our deposits on what he raised against his own holdings," the first one said, lifting his drink. "Lucky, we was."

The Kid noted that. Adam Grace, boss of the big Bearpaw owned by Susan Grace, the girl who had saved his neck this morning. So Adam Grace was head of the bank. Adam Grace, too, was a power on the Yucca range and maintained a big spread of gunslicks.

The other grunted, shooting a glance down at the table where Staley sat. "Maybe, maybe. But nothing is pulled in this town without Mike Staley's sayso."

"Not that time, Charlie! Some outsiders busted in the bank. Why Staley was madder 'n a spitting sidewinder after the robbery! He—"

THE Kid was trying to fit the pieces together, his head turned the other way so he would not appear to be eavesdropping. He had been gazing idly out one of the front windows. Then he galvanized. A man had passed, seen only for a split second, but he was certain it was peaked-faced Mort Royson.

He headed for the door. Three slightly orey-eyed cowhands barged in from the street. The impatient Kid tried to sidestep them. But the large one on the left, as all three lurched, swung an arm around the halfpint Solo's waist. "Common, pard, we're all having a little drink! Just one little to git the cockle-burrs outa our hair and—"

Precious moments passed before the Kid could disentangle himself. When he stepped outside, Mort was gone in the throng. The Kid hustled along up toward the main corners in the direction in which Mort had been headed. It looked as if he had lost him. Then, beyond a freighter's wagon across the road, he saw the high-set shoulders and pinch-topped type sombrero Mort wore turning into a dance-hall. As Solo darted out into the ankle-deep alkali, Mort flashed a glance over his shoulder, then was gone inside.

It was a mangy second-rate hole, dead and dingy as a cemetery at that hour of the day. It had the sleazy look of a painted woman minus her make-up. The Kid saw that as he stepped into the place. It was small, long and narrow, with booths at either side of the dancing space. And a dark-skinned, plump-faced girl glided out from one of those booths to accost him.

"Howdy, ma'm. Gent just came in here and—"

"Oh, Meester Beel, I am so happee to see you! Long time you no come

to see your leetle Margarita an'—" The olive-skinned girl rushed up to him and flung her arms about his neck. The fumes of the heavy perfume that drenched her almost overpowered the Kid. One shoulder strap of her low-bosomed blouse slipped off. Her lips sought his.

"Shucks, lady, my handle ain't Bill!" He fought free of her embrace but she clung to his arm as he strode forward. He tried to get his arm free and had to half drag her. Stairs leading to a balcony that ran across in front of some private rooms caught his eye. Even as he raked the balcony with his gaze, a door latch clicked up there. It was too dim to see much.

He swung to the stairs. As he put a boat on the first tread, she released him suddenly, shrinking back against the wall as if he had become poisonous or plague-ridden. He took another step and he heard the running clack of her high-heeled shoes as she retreated behind him hurriedly.

Then one of the doors up on the gallery was flung open. Mort Royson came stumbling out, shoved, and a burly house man appeared behind him. He grabed him by the neck.

"What the hell are you doing snooping 'round up here in the girls rooms, huh?" the house men roared. "Git going, you mangy little bum!" And he thrust him toward the stairs.

Mort grabbed the railing and steadied himself. "Kid!" he cried. "Holy Pete, I been looking all over for you!"

As he stood at the head of the stairs, the hawk-eyed Solo noted that his single gun holster sagged empty.

CHAPTER VIII

MORT Royson's story was a simple one. He told it to the Kid when they got out of the drear hole into the sunlight of the street.

"I saw that deputy marshal coming down the road right at me and ducked in there," Mort said, explaining his presence in the dancehall. His voice had a quake in it and his thin unhealthy face twitched nervously. "After them arresting you, I was afraid they'd do something to me."

He related his side of what had happened back in the little settlement where they had arrested the Kid. When he gestured the Kid noticed the half-healed scar of his bullet brand on the back of Mort's hand.

He had gone back to the store in that settlement, Mort told, and learned the Kid had been arrested. Then the folks there had gotten suspicious and grabbed him. "That's where I lost my gun," he said, tapping the empty holster. But he had finally talked his way out of it and come on to Yucca Bluffs that morning, gone to the jail and made inquiries but learned nothing. They told him they had no prisoners whatsoever. "I been looking all over," he ended.

The Kid asked him where he was putting up. Mort pointed out a boarding house up the side street from the triple-galleried facade of the Yucca Hotel. Mom Evans' place, he said it was called.

"Say, Kid, don't you think I ought to have a hogleg to pack if I'm going to be any help?" he asked worriedly.

Solo was impressed. For a few moments, after trailing Mort into that dance-hall, he'd entertained some suspicions about him. But now he figured he was wrong; Mort Royson, though not very prepossessing in appearance and apparently scary, seemed to mean well. The Kid took him down to one of the big General Stores where they had a stock of firearms and bought him a walnut-butted .45. En route he gave him some idea of the setup.

"I'm in with the outfit Ryerson is supposed to have run with," he said. He left out names and gave few details. Mort meant well, but if something slipped and pressure were applied to him, the Kid figured he would crack easily. What he didn't know he couldn't reveal. Yet he could be valuable as a messenger if nothing else. If he, Solo, could put the finger on Ryerson and hang the deadwood on him, then should get trapped himself, Mort would be able to tell the Law how to grab hold of Ryerson. And Lefty Ryerson, once nabbed and forced to talk, could save Mack Royson's neck from the noose.

"Keep your eyes pealed and wait for me to call the play, Mort," Solo told him as they left the store. "If you pick up anything, you know where to reach me, at the Reilly place. Adios, amigo, and—"

THEY had stepped onto the big store porch. "Just a minute." One-armed Sudden, lounging against one of the fat pillars, sort of rolled around it and dropped his one hand on Mort's arm. He clamped on it. "Friend of yours, Strant?"

"You want to give the poor devil heart failure?" the Kid came back glibly. "He thought it was the iron hand of the Law, Sudden. Meet my friend, Morton. We've travelled a piece of trail together now and then. Morton ain't exactly no terror from the holster, but he'll never starve so long as they's a pack of cards in the same county."

Sudden let his eyes slide down the peaked-faced bank clerk and his lip curled. "Howdy, Morton. . . This ain't no town for small-timers." He spat over the railing.

When Morton walked off, the Kid locked eyes with Sudden. "You're smart, eh, Sudden," the Kid said softly. "Bet you never make the mistake of crowding the wrong hair-pin."

Sudden's half-bald head furrowed. "Meaning you?"

Solo shrugged. He knew Sudden's breed. Once let them step on your toes and they'd soon have their boot-heels planted on your neck. "Forgot to mention, before, Sudden, that I sloped into this country looking for a gent. I'm a mite sorry you ain't him."

Sudden sucked air slowly through parted lips. "A man keeps drooping a horn and he gits tangled in something sooner or later," he said woodenly. He hoped to be impressive.

The Kid chuckled. "I crave to get tangled in a drink. Toss you to see who pays . . . . ."

* * * *

NOTHING happened that night. And the always impatient Kid, craving a showdown, felt like a half-tamed stallion with a cockle burr under the saddle blanket. Once he spotted Ryerson, he knew it was going to be no cinch to cut him out of the herd and get him hogtied. And Ryerson dead would be useless; he had to be toted back to Hogarth, alive, to talk. But Solo Strant's hands were as good as manacled: because he didn't know who the rest of Staley's outfit were, he didn't dare risk doing any questioning about town. He might be swapping words with some gent on the Staley payroll, and once he made that mistake, he would be ear-marked for a hunk of buzzard bait within a matter of hours. It was a touch and go situation.

Champing at the bit, the Kid drifted around the next day, looking, looking for an hombre with his right hand missing. He already had a strong hunch this Ryerson was Staley's ace gun-passer. The Kid sat on the long bench before the blacksmith's shop with the town loafers, curry-combing the parade of passers-by with his sleepy-seeming eyes. He saw Sudden in the doorway of the barbershop rolling a smoke with his single hand. For a gent who had lost his other arm recently, the big gunslinger was mighty deft. Then the Kid figured it that Sudden must have been naturally left-handed all his life.

Sudden put a match to it, then crooked a finger imperiously at Solo. "Fella in the barbershop before," said Sudden, looking around idly, when the Kid crossed, "said he'd seen you somewheres."

The Kid nodded solemnly. "I been there. Forget when."

"Fella said when he seen you, you was chatting with a John Law. . . . real friendly-like too."

Solo nodded again. "Funny thing, Sudden. This'll add to your education. Them John Laws don't pollute you—specially when they don't know who you really are. I only knew one badge-packer who ate his young, and he died of colic at an early age."

Sudden's expectoration made dust jump. "Somehow you don't make me laugh much. . . .Come on, Staley wants to see you."

The Kid wondered if Staley had somehow cut his real sign and a showdown impended. But when they rode out to the barn and went up to the house, he discovered it wasn't a case of the boss wanting to see just him. Three gun-passers were already there.

Staley got up from the piano. "There's a man down in Fenton's Flats—he just got in there lately—who has got to be killed. And he happens to be a tophand killer himself. But I'm plump positive a certain enemy of mine plans hiring him, so he's got to go. We'll draw cards: low man gets the job."

Producing a deck from a table drawer, he shuffled them with incredible rapidity, gave them a triple cut, then fanned them in a gambler's rosette. "Draw, gentlemen."

SUDDEN plucked one from the face-down handful, s h r u g g e d when he saw it was a diamond ten. A bow-legged gunhand chose a queen of clubs. The third man came up with an ace and kissed it. "Got a date with the new skirt at the dance-hall tonight," he explained.

"Gunner," said Staley to the Kid. The Kid drew but did not turn his card over until the last man had chosen. The latter came out with a seven of diamonds. The Kid inspected his card.

It was a six of spakes. He was low man.

Staley said, "I forgot to mention there's a hundred dollar bonus on this job. The gent who gets his light put out is Osage Copp."

One of the gun-slicks sucked his breath noisily. Copp, the gunman, was only too well known. Though he had never seen the hombre, the Kid knew the man's rep; Copp was as naturally born to kill as a sidewinder. A deadly marksman, once he hauled gun steel, Copp rode that trigger until his opponent was a candidate for a ride on a shutter up to the nearest Boothill. His business was gunplay and he executed it as cold-bloodedly and impassionately as a man might string fence or shoe a horse. Just as he knew no mercy and was without conscience, he also was a stranger to fear—a bad chunk of poison to tangle with, in short. The Kid's hand started to his neck where the silver skull customarily dangled, then he saw Sudden watching him hawkishly.

Staley dismissed the other three gun-passers. Walking by the piano, he ran a thumb nail down the keys. Then he faced Solo. The Kid noticed something about the boss of Yucca, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. It was some inner thing, an aura, that made itself felt in the atmosphere of the room. The only outward sign was Staley's eyes; they glittered oddly and the pupils were contracted to obnormally b r i g h t points. But he was perfectly cool and possessed.

"Copp is there now—in Fenton's," he began to talk. Staley described him, said he was a tall, wall-eyed slat of a man with a slight limp—very red-faced with a big wedge of nose hinging out of it. Right now he was travelling under the name of Waters. Copp did not drink heavily but always hung out in a whisky mill when he was waiting for something to develop. "He's got one trait: every couple of minutes he pulls at his hat brim. You can't miss him.

Solo nodded calmly, aware that Sudden's eyes never left him.

Staley closed it up, speaking over his shoulder as he seated himself at the piano. "Leave for Fenton's Flats tonight. Sudden, send George along to cover him in case of trouble. Gunner, you should have no trouble finding Copp there tomorrow morning. How you do the job—in the back or from ambush—makes no matter: Get him. . . But don't get careless—he's dangerous." The pin-pointed eyes drilled the Kid once, then music ran out from Staley's fingers twinkling over the keyboard. "Mozart," he said to nobody.

* * *

AS A trail companion, George was one up on an empty saddle; he, at least, whistled. But no more. In response to the Kid's attempts at

even small-talk conversation, he only grunted monosyllabic affirmatives or negatives. Sometimes he merely nodded. He was a large, puffy-fleshed man with a horse jaw and piggish eyes.

They had camped just outside the place an hour before dawn and caught some shuteye. Now, under a blistering, scowling copper-eyed sun in a cloudless heaven they rode into Fenton's Flats at a walk. It was barely a settlement at the fork of the main trail, with mangy houses straggling off from the handful of buildings at the split. There was a paintless General Store, a hay and feed place, and two barrooms that looked like oversized cock-roach traps. The Kid loosened the butts-forward hoglegs in his shell belts.

He had no twinges of conscience about going out to kill this Osage Copp. The man was a sub-human thing, long overdue for a hempen necktie at the hands of the Law; the earth would be well rid of him. It would be like burning down a slaver-jawed lobo. And the Kid sensed it was a kind of test on Mike Staley's part. Solo had a hunch it was no accident he had drawn low card in that cut by the gunmen.

A couple of drowsy-eyed gents whittling on the General Store porch looked them over as they rode by. They turned in at the hitchrail of the first barroon. George volunteered conversation for the first time.

"He won't be expecting nobody in this spit-in-the-trail. . . You oughta be able to git him from behind easy."

Solo raked him with his eyes. "I'M calling him and gunning when he fills his hand," he said simply. It was his way. He would give even a polecat a square shake. Looking beyond George, he saw the small pall of dust hanging over the trail in the windless air, dust from the horse-hoofs of some incoming riders.

They walked to the cut-down doors and peered over them past the buzzing flies. Osage Copp was there; there was no mistaking him. There were only three men at the two-bit bar, two of them talking together. Down at the far end Copp stood, a tall slat of a man, very red-faced, as Staley had described him. He was small faced with the big nose dominating it incongruously. And even as Solo and George looked, he reached up and tugged at the brim of his pinch-topped Stetson. It was Copp beyond a doubt.

George muttered, "I'll be covering the rear."

The Kid pushed through and advanced into the dimness. He saw Copp's eyes flick to him, then return to the study of his half-empty glass. The drink wrangler, dozing on a stool, never even looked up. Hands hanging loose before him, the Kid halted about ten feet from the killer.

"Fella outside looking for some gent named Waters. Anybody know him?" Solo said, looking around vaguely. "Didn't think so. This fella says he wanted to tell Waters something about a U. S. marshal."

COPP jerked, small mean eyes boring past the Kid in an attempt to see who was outside. At the same time, his hands dropped from sight.

The Kid smiled sleepily directly at him. "Howdy, Copp. . . I'm here to settle with you, killer. My handle's Strant. . . Fill your hands when you're ready!"

The once somnolent place became tense with an electric charge in the atmosphere. Copp had galvanized, was motionless. But his eyes cut around at the half-pint Kid. "*Solo* Strant—the Silver Kid," he said in a tight-throated whisper. He had recognized him despite the fact some of his trappings were missing—And, recognizing him, Copp needed no further explanations.

It was still with a brittle pulsing stillness for the space of several seconds. From down the road came the splashing sound as somebody emptied a bucket. Then Copp said drily:

"Get outa town while you're still alive, Strant. I'm giving you that chance. Uh-huh. I ain't drawing now; hit the leather!"

The Kid's head moved from right to left slightly. "No hombre ever made me back track yet, Copp. I came

to kill you and I ain't pulling my pin till I do! Go for your holsters!"

But Osage Copp only shook his head wearily, picked up his drink and surveyed it lazily. "For the last time, I'm telling you to go visit your uncle or somebody over in the next county." Then his voice went harsh and grating. "I'll be coming out that barroom door in five minutes. If you're still in town, you'll be signing your own death warrant!"

CHAPTER IX

A MAN came out of the barroom and went husling down the sidewalk at a half run despite his years. He paused to yell something to a man in a window, went on and stopped to tell it again to another man emerging from any alley. He stuck his head in the doorway of the place's second whisky mill. Watching from beneath the scrawny cottonwood across the street and down toward the General Store from the first barroom, the Kid understood that the man was passing the word that there was going to be a gun duel in Fenton's Flats.

Lounging beside Solo Strant, George stopped his tuneless whistling a moment. "I'll be drifting down and git me a nice alley to hie in. I'll cover your back, just in case." He had already moved their ponies down from the saloon hitchrail to ground-anchor them on the west end of the town for a quick getaway.

"All right," the waiting Kid said, heavy-lidded eyes never leaving the batwing doors of the bar. "But don't interfere, I'll handle him."

"As you say," said George and ambled off.

The town seemed as ever, a spot on the flat lands with the shimmering heat devils wavering against the haze in the distance across the sun-baked range. But there was an unreal stillness in Fenton's Flats now. The street was deserted save for the Kid himself. He saw people watching from behind half-closed shutters, furtive heads peeping from doorways. Over to the east, against a cobalt-hued expanse of sky, a rusty buzzard wheeled patiently.

There was a quick brief drum of horse hoofs from behind the main street. Then all was quiet again except for the creak of a well windlass. Time seemed like something strained through a keyhole, dripping away with tortuous slowness.

THE bat-wings of the barroom stirred, settled back into place. A vagrant puff of wind whisked alkali in a minature twister down the road. Then one of the bat-wing doors jerked forward a few inches and Copp stepped sideward through the opening so that he was suddenly on the street without actually opening the door. His hands were already clapped over his tied-down pair of Colts, slung low on the hips. He took a step toward the Kid, spitting in the dust once.

Solo Strant was already gliding toward him diagonally across the wide street. His spurs sent little globules of dust drifting up behind. Again that thought flashed through his mind: this was a test. And if he handled Copp, he would establish himself with Mike Staley. When he did that, he might get to know the rest of Staley's underground outfit, and inevitably that meant meeting Ryerson sooner or later, provided he still lived.

"All right," Copp said matter-of-factly. "This is one hell of a hole to pick to die in, Strant." Then he was slaunchways and grabbing for his gun butts. They seemed to materialize in his hands like magic, with his huge nose thrust out over them like an animals centing a spoor. Then they blinked fire and flame.

But the Kid's deadly hands had already criss-crossed over his body, come up wheeling his silver-stocked Colts into firing position. They spurted explosions. Copp was snapped around as a slug took him in a shoulder. One of his guns went, but he steadied himself as he swung behind the trunk of a dead limbless tree on the other side of the road. Then the Kid was firing again, and

Copp went down under two slugs, one that ripped off his breast-bone and deflected upward to tear off the side of his head.

The Kid sucked air, instinctively, in relief. He had never seen a faster man from the holster than Copp. The next instant, Solo Strant almost died. Lead smashed and tore around him; riders appeared on the street from two alleys, one on his right and one on his left. They had him cut off from his pony. He saw George stumble into sight and go down, shot dead through the head. The Kid was dumfounded.

"Git him afore he gits Copp!" bawled one of the horsemen, not realizing that Copp's light was already out.

SOLO found himself firing automatically, first to one side, then the other. He had the nasty feeling that he wasn't going to get out of this tight spot. He dropped the horse of a rider swinging in from his right. The man ran for cover, then the Kid's trigger fingers froze. Behind that rider he recognized another, it was the copper-haired Susan Grace. This was the Bearpaw drawing chips on Copp's side. It flashed through the Kid's head how Staley had said an enemy of his planned to hire Copp; this meant it was the Bearpaw.

As one of his hoglegs snapped with that hollow sound that meant it was empty, he jumped back into a doorway. With his other weapon he put lead through the shoulder of a dismounted man attempting to close in from his left. The other spun and then retreated, staggering like a drunkard. The Kid got a lull in which to reload.

Somebody yelled. From the left the Kid saw a rider coming up from behind the three Bearpaw men there. One of them sagged in the kak as the newcomer triggered, then Solo saw that the latter was leading his own paint pony.

The stranger pulled up in a swirl of dust right in front of the Kid, yelling. Solo wasted no time asking questions, he dashed out and grabbed at the saddle horn of his animal. Even as he fitted a foot into the stirrup, he got hit. He had just holstered his empty left-hand gun, and the slug hit him in the flesh of the left arm, then went on to pass between two of his ribs. How he hauled himself into that hull after staggering against the side of the paint, he never knew.

But he was up, and the wiry rider beside him was firing and yelling between shots. They swung to the Kid's left, the way the stranger had come. At the edge of the Flats, the latter reined up for a moment and fired with careful aim at the Bearpaw men who had started in pursuit. One of them hit the dust as his horse collapsed under him, and that was the end of the pursuit.

Let's make tracks!" the wiry one called to the wounded Kid. He cut off toward the northwest.

THEY dropped into the bed of a long since dried-up creek and struck directly north. Fighting off pain, Solo gripped the saddle horn hard and still had all he could do to keep from falling from the paint horse. When they came to a fork of the old creek, the stranger pulled up and drew out a pint of redeye. The Kid had a quick drink and they went on. There was no pursuit. Solo had killed Osage Copp, the thing Susan Grace and the Bearpaw gunhands been trying to prevent, so the damage was done.

They left the creek bed and cut over toward a wooded slope that jutted from a spur of hills. Halfway up it, the wiry gent led the way to a cabin, then caught the wounded Kid as he slid from the saddle. Solo remembered that. He remembered being carried into the place, and how the stranger, heating some water on the sheet iron stove, started to dress his wounds. Then he fell into a deep sleep.

When he woke, it was night. A candle burned on the table in a saucer. The wiry stranger came over and helped him get some java from a tin mug between his lips. Then he followed that up with another slug

of redeye. Solo asked for a quirly. The wiry man rolled one and held a match to it when he got it between the Kid's lips. Solo dragged deep on it.

"Had yourself a tough mess of gunfighting back there," the wiry man said.

"Uh-huh," the Kid admitted as he shifted under the blanket on the bunk. "But why did you buy chips, fella?"

The other smiled at the Kid sidewise. "Old weakness of mine, mister." He got up to get Solo some fresh java and the Kid noticed that he limped slightly. Now that the excitement was over, Solo saw that he had a black patch over his left eye. The eye was sightless as the result of a bullet injury to an optic nerve and the lid had a trick of drooping markedly. "Yep," went on the other, "I saw how you was outnumbered and I always pitch in with the underdog. . . . . .maybe because I been one so many times myself in this world." He laughed almost soundlessly with a little grimace that told he was laughing.

Solo drank more of the java and felt some better, but his left arm throbbed with pain and was just about useless. The upper left side of his body felt half paralized. Grimly he realized he was going to be out of action for some little while. When he started to talk again the stranger shook his head.

"You gotta rest, fella. You stopped some lead. I think the wounds'll be all right. But—" He produced a bottle. It was some herb medicine he said he got from the Indians, Yaquis, in Mexico. "Take a jolt of this and you'l feel a lot better afterwards."

It was brackish and bitter tasting. The Kid remembered the other taking his quirly from his fingers—the next thing he remembered he was waking up and it was broad daylight. He flet a lot stronger. The wiry gent put a big tin plate of some kind of stew before him. After he had eaten, Solo began to feel something like his old self. The other pulled a chair over beside the bunk.

When the Kid asked him his name, he said he was called Amigo, Amigo Jones. "This fell out of your pocket after I carried you in here," he said. He held out the minature silver skull that Solo usually wore on the chin strings of his sombrero. Their eyes locked over it. 'Solo Strant, the Silver Kid, aren't you?" said Amigo Jones softly. He smiled.

Despite the black patch that disfigured his face, the gentle, full-lipped smile made him almost handsome for the moment. Beneath his brown hair, his face lighted up. For a moment the very round, quick-moving eye that could drill through a man became soft and friendly. The hard line of his sharp jaw was lost. He looked younger and far less cynical.

There was no sense denying it, so Solo nodded. "You cut my sign correct, Amigo. And sometime, somehow, I'll figure a way to repay you for coming to my aid back there and—"

Amigo Jones held up a hand to halt his thanks. "What I can't figure though, Kid, is—knowing what I do about your rep—what you're doing running with Mike Staley's crowd." It was actually a question.

The Kid's sleepy-seeming eyes flicked to where his hoglegs and shell belts lay on a corner of the table. "Amigo, I don't know what side of the game you're sitting on yourself yet."

Amigo Jones paced across the cabin nervously, then faced the Kid again, looking him squarely in the eye. "Staley doesn't know it yet—but I'm bucking him. And Adam Grace of the Bearpaw, too, I reckon."

The Kid's interest was riveted by the words. He had a hunch that this strange Amigo Jones might be a help to him. He decided to gamble on some bold words. "Amigo, I'm on Staley's payroll so as I can work from the inside. I'm looking for a gent who has—if he doesn't now—worked for Staley. It is necessary to find this man to save the life of an

innocent man condemned to die up at the Big House. So—like I said—I'm working from the inside."

Pulling out a Bowie knife, Jones pared down a broken finger nail. "That's a dangerous game. Staley is smart and him and Adam Grace are playing for bigger stakes than anybody knows." He shook his head.

Solo was surprised. "Didn't know them two were working together. I figured they were at odds under cover." He told, vaguely, how he had seen Grace men bust up a Staley hanging party. "And then, yesterday—that Copp, the killer Staley sent me to get—well, it's plain now he was due to be hired by the Bearpaw. I saw Susan Grace there when those riders struck at me."

Amigo Jones nodded. "That's what makes it different, the girl being there. What her game is, that I don't know."

"Are you sure of your facts—that Staley and Adam Grace of the Bearpaw are working hand in glove?"

Jones stared hard ahead. "I'll tell you more to prove what I know. I drifted in this way—never mind from where. And I was hired to rob the National and Cattlemen's Bank."

THE Kid's eyes popped. Jones went on with a cold chuckle. "Adam Grace himself hired me for the job. An inside job. Sabe?" It was little short of incredible. The back door of the bank was to be unlocked and the vault left open. "You see? Grace was really robbing the people of the town. It would look as if he, too, had been robbed when his bank was busted in."

The Kid remembered the bar conversation he had overheard in Staley's *Oasis*. How Grace had won good-will by giving everybody back half of their lost dinero.

Jones continued, told how he got together a few men and had a wagon hidden down the alley near the bank. Everything had gone off as planned. They had gotten the dinero out, cleaned the vault. Then they'd met Grace and a few of his gun spread as arranged.

"I turned the dinero over to him and got my cut. Then I returned to town, to Yucca, figuring it would be safer. They'd be scouring the trails in every direction, I knew. That's where things went wrong. Somebody had been following me, I guess. Picked up my sign somewheres."

He had hardly gotten back to Yucca Bluffs when Staley's men jumped him. He had been hunted down like an animal. "I got into the hotel with 'em hot on my spurs. Then that Ryerson, Staley's top gun trigger man—he damned near killed me. I—"

"Who?" purred the Kid softly though he had galvanized.

"Ryerson," said Amigo Jones.

That was the hombre Solo was looking for, the hombre who could save innocent Mack Royson from hanging—

CHAPTER X

SOLO almost came out of the bunk despite his weakened condition. "You know where he is now, Amigo?"

Jones shrugged. "I know him to see him, but it's hard to say where he might be at any moment. He's a valuable tool to Mike Staley and Staley uses him very carefully. When things get real hot, he sends Ryerson outa town, from what I hear, so he won't become too well marked."

The Kid sat silent, Jones studied him.

"Say, Kid, what makes you so interested in Ryerson? Of course, I'd like to kill him myself if I got the chance. . . ."

Solo Strant shrugged. It might be dangerous to tell this Amigo Jones too much. After all, the man was a self-admitted outlaw, a bank robber. He had hired himself out for that job. There was no telling when he might not sell his guns again, when he would double cross for a price. "Oh, nothing much," the Kid parried. "I knew he was a slick devil when it came to slamming a hammer and just wanted to be on guard against him."

They both made fresh brain pills. Jones squinted at nothing through blue-gray smoke.

"When I hired out for the bank job, I didn't rightly know what a double cross it was going to be," Jones went on as if having read the Kid's mind. I needed a chunk of dinero bad for—for a certain purpose. Grace didn't tell me he owned the bank, just said he had a string on a certain official of it. Then later—I learned. And I learned also how it was even a double double-cross."

The Kid said, "By grab, you could strike back at this Adam Grace by exposing the trick."

Amigo Jones was already shaking his head. "Not a chance, Kid! I thought of that, but where's the evidence? And who in Yucca Bluffs would believe me—just an outlaw from up the trail." He gave that cold chuckle again. "Yeah, a double double-cross. Adam Grace double crossed Mike Staley on it too."

IT was a locoed tale. But watching the solemn grim light in Amigo's eye, the Kid knew he was giving it straight; wounded in the leg, he had finally made his getaway and slipped from town.

"But I had seen Mike Staley himself when they were trying to corner me in the hotel—just once; that once was enough." His usually even low-pitched voice got a savage rasping note in it when he said this. "I knew Staley from before."

He had hidden out in the hills till his leg healed. But Amigo Jones was not finished with the Yucca country; he had a piece of business to settle. Finally he had captured one of the Staley outfit.

"They'll never lay eyes on that little coyote again—I made him talk, —Plenty, he told. The double double-cross."

That had been Adam Grace against Staley. The two had made a deal to rob the bank—for their own advantage, of course—and Grace had pulled a switch on Staley by hiring an outsider, Amigo Jones, to do the job hours earlier than originally planned. When Staley had discovered the bank had already been busted open, he'd been sore as a boil, had hit the trails with his gunhands.

"That's when they picked me up, I guess."

The Kid was trying to get Jones' angle on this. "Hell, you could tip Staley to what actually did happen. He'd go after Adam Grace—"

But Amigo Jones was shaking his head again. "I may do that before the last card is played. I said that I had known Mike Staley before; I did. His name was Stalson then, and we was partners in a little rustling venture down in the Panhandle."

The next part was brutal. Jones had had a girl down that way. He was right fond of her, and had even wondered about settling down and getting hitched. One night Staley, then Stalson, had kidnapped the girl and taken her to a cabin out on the barren lands. When she was found two days later, she had been more dead than alive. Within the week, she had died; but not before she had told the story.

He had taken the cold trail, Amigo Jones said—kept on it for months without catching up to Staley. Then there had been no more sign, and finally he had been told Staley was dead.

"But the night of the bank robbery —I saw him and recognized him." A deer fly buzzed at a window as he broke off.

THE Kid reached out and squeezed Jones' shoulder. Instinctively, he liked this lean gent with the quick smile. "And now you're working to get him in your gun sights, eh?"

"No—not right off. Killing would be too kind for Jim Stalson—now Mike Staley. Too damned easy, Kid. You see, Staley lives in pain." It seemed that years back Staley had been shot in the head. His hair was so combed it hid the bullet scar. But part of the lead had never been removed, and now, daily, at odd moments, he underwent spurts of pain in the head. "That pain is enough to break him. So Mike Staley uses dope—constantly. Has to have it

to keep from going insane or mebbe killing himself."

The Kid remembered how strange Staley's eyes had been the other afternoon when he sent him on the Copp job. And the never-still fluttering hands too. And how Staley never drank. It all fitted. A drug fiend!

"From that hairpin I captured," Jones went on, "I even learned how it's run up to him from Mexico about once a week. Twice now I've stopped that messenger with it. He never got through at all. Some day. . . some day—I don't know how much reserve of the stuff Staley has—but he's going to run out of that drug he *has* to have. . . That day. . . "

A chill hit the iron-nerved Kid's backbone. It was maniacal, inhuman. Yet he understood how Jones must feel. Rising, the lean man walked about slowly.

"Yes, his nerves'll break. His mind'll start to go. Then he'll make a mistake and show his hand. I don't want him to die till that happens. I aim to break him first, to find out what kind of a game him and Adam Grace are playing." He pinched out his cigaret, apparently oblivious of the hot coal. "You see, Kid, Staley is crazy for power; always was absolutely locoed for it. He's got nerve. Killing him would not mean so much—just get him out of that pain. But if I could break him—leave him like a stripped rat—before he died. . ." He didn't have to say the rest. He went over and poked some wood in the rusty sheet iron stove to heat up the pot of java.

After a spell, Solo spoke. "Aren't you running a risk, hanging out around Yucca like this?" He sensed there were certain things Amigo Jones, had not told him. Just like Strant wasn't showing his whole hand to the one-eyed outlaw yet.

Jones, smiling, said, not so much. "I'm on the Bearpaw payroll right now. Working it from both ends, you see. Adam Grace doesn't recognize me, he only saw me at night when he hired me for the bank job. And I didn't wear this," he touched the black eye patch, "then or when I hit the bank and Staley's men caught up with me. You see, I figured it would identify me too easily. And I didn't have the limp then, either. Now, it's permanent." It was the result of that slug Rryerson put in him in the fight that night. "So, I've changed—just enough." He shrugged.

THEY had a fresh cup of coffee. Here's another thing I learned," Jones said. "Shucks, I sure am blatting my tongue off. But mebbeso you and me'll be pulling in double harness before this thing is ended."

"Could be," the Kid said succinctly.

"You want a man—and I got another ear-marked. Well, here's this. Cow outfits are being driven off the Yucca range by Adam Grace and Staley. They don't seem to want nobody around."

"How?" the Kid queried. "Ain't there some Law here?"

Jones rubbed at the black eye patch. "Maybe. But it's all being done legal-like. Two outfits already've cleared out, and a third owner went bankrupt just before the bank hold-up."

"How was it done?"

"They tangled with the Bearpaw. All legal-like, I said. There was arguments over fence lines and some water-holes. Then they was cut fences and cow critters of the Bearpaw run off. And gunfights over that. From all the evidence, the two outfits that quit attacked the Bearpaw."

"*They* attacked the big Bearpaw?" The Kid was incredulous.

Jones nodded. "All the evidence points that way. The owner that went bankrupt, he had to sell off his whole herd to pay for damages when he run Bearpaw stuff off a canyon wall. It was that or go to jail. Everybody said Adam Grace was right decent not to press criminal charges."

The Kid whistled a long note. This was almost more locoed than the personal part of Amigo Jones' story.

"The gent who went bankrupt," Jones concluded, "well, the bank held the foreclosed mortgage on his place. The other two outfits who sold out—

well, I know Staley bought one of 'em though he ain't operating it. And I think Grace and the Bearpaw got the other cheap, but using a dummy as the title-holder. Pee-culiar, ain't it?"

Solo nodded as Amigo Jones watched him closely with his one eye. Jones was about to say something more, Solo sensed. But the lean man asked a question first.

"Who's the hairpin whose sign you're trying to cut, Kid?"

The Kid paused. It was too dangerous. This Amigo Jones, he realized, was implacable in his quiet way. Ryerson had already once almost killed him. Jones would give no quarter and have no feelings about another man's life—meaning Mack Royson's up at prison—if killing Ryerson in the showdown gave a chance to settle with Mike Staley. It might be wiser not to name him.

"He goes under several handles," the Kid said vaguely. "But I'll know him when I catch up to him."

"I see," said Jones curtly. "More java? What was we talking about again? . . . Looka that nosey pack rat over there by the door. By grab, they're bold. Once I saw one. . . "

* * *

A COUPLE of hours before dawn the next morning, they left the cabin and headed back for Yucca Bluffs. The Kid was very stiff in his left side and still weak from blood loss. Early in the afternoon, they drew up at the bank of the creek outside the big range town. Amigo Jones put out his hand.

"All right, Kid. It's nice to know there's one decent human critter mixed up in this deal." He winked his good eye. "Maybe I don't need to tell you this: but just because a gunny's never packed a lawman's badge in his days don't mean he's all blackhearted." He was referring to his own past as an outlaw. "Hope the arm comes along all right."

The Kid glanced down at his arm in a makeshift sling. He now had on a faded maroon shirt Jones had given him to replace his bullet-rent bloodstained one. "Sure, it'll be all right, Amigo; I've stopped lead before. And it'd been a danged sight worse if you hadn't happened along. I still owe you a heap on that score."

Amigo Jones smiled. "Mebbeso some day I'll have to ask you to pay it back, Kid. Things're going to be hotter than the hinges of Hell afore they're better here. I'll be close around, watching, always watching."

"Adios," the Kid said. "You get in a tight, send me word."

They parted, Jones swinging up the bank through the cottonwoods at a hand lope. The Kid went on into Yucca Bluffs with the afternoon sun beating on his shoulders. He turned into the main road. A buckboard making a turn threw up a blinding cloud of alkali. Then, through it, he saw Mort Royson. The latter was astride his cayuse, his belongings in his saddle roll behind him. When he saw Solo he paled, then rained down.

"Praise be to the Almighty," he sang out. "I thought you'd been killed and I was heading home. Guess I lost hope," he added in a lower voice. "Ain't much I can do alone without you, Kid."

Something about him gave him the look of a man who had been anticipating a trip. . .

CHAPTER XI

THE NEXT morning, arm still in a sling, the Kid ambled along the main street. He felt a heap stronger, and he hummed a tune as if he hadn't a care in the world, but he was plenty worried. Time was running out on Mack Royson up in the Big House, and still no clue to Ryerson's whereabouts. Solo wondered if he should have been franker with Amigo Jones. But there was always the point that he would be risking the life of a man who already had his neck as good as in a noose.

He got down near the hotel. There were a handful of back-slappers around a rotund, duded-out little man. The Kid sized him up and wanted to laugh. The gent was togged out like an Injun squaw with her allotment money. Despite the heat he had on a

heavy gray frock coat with velvet lapels. Beneath a flowered vest he had on a gambler's shirt with white ruffles at the neck. He held a gray stove-pipe hat in one hand and gestured with a long cigar in the other. In his cravat a big diamond glittered.

Yet, all in all, with his tubby body and over-length arms and the forehead that slanted back sharply from his face, plus the fuzz of close-growing dark hair, he looked like a monkey. When the Kid got closer, he saw too that he gave the impression of being actually smaller than he was. Slits of eyes kept darting around as he talked and gestured lavishly. Finishing a story, he laughed loudly and first at it.

"Who is he?" the Kid asked a porch lounger.

The man spoke with awe. "Why that's Adam Grace, boss of the Bearpaw and head of the bank. He's a big man. Real rich, too. Uh-huh."

Solo could hardly believe it. The man seemed absurd as he pushed back his coat-tails to reveal the ivory-stocked guns in holsters at his hips. A couple of moments later there were a brace of quick shots from up the road. Even as he pivoted, right hand sliding to his left hip, the Kid cut a glance Adam Grace's way. The other's eyes had become reptillian spots in his head, and one of those ivory-stocked guns was out, muzzle peeping from the front of his voluminous coat.

The gunshots proved to be nothing more than a liquored-up cowhand celebrating early; the excitement died. With an airy wave of his hands to the group of sycophants to follow, Grace headed for a barroom. And by that time the Kid appreciated how dangerous he was despite his ridiculous rig.

MOVING on, Solo came to the corner just as Susan Grace, Adam Grace's niece, rounded the corner of the hotel building. She was a dazzling picture in white whipcord riding breeches and a black silk shirt. For the first time he saw the cameo-like perfection of her features. Her face was almost statuelike, might have been stupid, had it not been for her dark bright eyes alive with alert intelligence. They narrowed as she recognized the Kid, and her soft-lipped mouth curled in scorn.

With her long coltlike legs, she stepped closer quickly, unafraid. "So you lived, coward?" she said low-voiced but witheringly. "I and my men saved your life that morning out on the range; one of them died doing it, Mr Strant."

"I've been waiting for the opportunity to thank you for that, ma'm. I always did have a peculiar aversion to being strung up by mistake. It was right nice of you to—"

She tried to eye him down. "And how did you pay it back? By murdering a man in cold blood over in Fenton's Flats! By—"

The Kid's eyes got a sleepier look, a danger sign. His hand lifted to his throat where the small skull usually hung. He didn't like to be called a murderer. "Miss Grace, that man was a killer with a record behind him. Still, I gave him every chance and—"

Bitterly she interrupted. "I believe you're in Mike Staley's hire now, Mr Strant! And when a man sells his hardware to Staley, we all know—"

"Folks out to hire a gunman-killer like Osage Copp can't talk much," the Kid drawled aggravatingly. "Folks who maintain gun spreads like the Bearpaw—"

"The Bearpaw wasn't hiring Copp," she flung back heatedly, then looked as if she would have liked to choke herself for the words. "Anyway, in dealing with killers, it is sometimes necessary to get the best gunman you can find and not ask embarrassing questions."

"When a person—even a right attractive girl—runs with the lobo breed, she's liable to get mud on her boots as well as on her name."

IT WAS more than temper flaring in her that dictated her next move; it was a sense of guilt, the fact that she had opened herself up to such an attack. Her arm came up and her riding quirt swished. But the hair-trigger-quick Kid caught her wrist in his good hand. Her mouth jerked open against the pain of his

vising fingers; the quirt slipped from her fingers. Catching it before it hit the ground, Solo presented it to her with a little bow. People glanced around, but the Kid wore a quiet smile so it seemed like some byplay in jest.

"Your quirt, ma'm."

She took it, mouth quivering in fury. "Some day you won't move fast enough, killer," she whispered hoarsely. "Somehow I'm going to drive men like you off the Yucca range if I have to horsewhip them out."

The Kid smiled. "Miss Grace, nobody is stopping you from getting your uncle and his gunmen down in the barroom to come and settle the score with me now." He nodded toward the place Adam Grace had gone.

She glanced that way, then she brushed at imaginary dust on her blouse, stepped around Solo, and went off. But she didn't go in the direction of the place her uncle was. That puzzled the Kid.

He was returning up the street when Sudden eased out of a livery stable alley. "Be up at the bend in the creek where the lightning-split willow is, Gunner. Going to be a little work to do tonight. Some of the other boys will be there." He tongued his quirly from his mouth and moved on. "About midnight," he tossed over his shoulder.

The Kid's hopes began to climb. If there was going to be a bunch he might run into Ryerson, the killer with the missing right hand. Sometimes it seemed as if he must be on a blind trail as far as his chances of finding this Ryerson. It would be tough enough to nab the hairpin alive and make him talk. But first he had to be found—and in time.

Later in the evening he went up to the boarding house and had a few words with the boogery Mort Royson. "Sit tight now. We might get the break tonight," he ordered him. Then he went down to Mike Staley's *Oasis* to see if he might stumble onto any tip there about the night's proceedings.

Staley was chatting quietly at the end of the bar with the usual pot of coffee before him. The man he talked with was red-necked Warren, deputy marshal of the town. The Kid drifted over to a stud table where a newcomer with plenty of dinero was bucking the house dealer. Somebody muttered that the last pot had been for over four hundred dollars and that the house was losing. The house man reinspected his hole card and upped the ante another fifty.

"Going to be high stakes tonight." said a familiar voice in the Kid's ear. As he started to swing around he glimpsed the black patch over Amigo Jones' left eye. Then he froze, eyes on the green baize of the table as Amigo caught his arm warningly. "I mean, what's building out on the creek," Amigo added.

"How do you know?" the Kid asked sotto voiced as the out-of-towner swore harshly when he saw the dealer's three queens.

"Never mind. But it's our chance to strike. Adam Grace and Staley are teaming up for another job."

"What?"

"A play to drive the Bar-J out of the country." The Bar-J was a smaller but well-to-do outfit run by two middleaged brothers, the Jormons. It lay across the eastern fence line of the Bearpaw outfit.

Without movement of mouth, a prison-learned trick, Amigo Jones imparted the information with incredible rapidity. Grace had already been charging the Jormon brothers with running off Bearpaw doggies. Some Bar-J stuff had been taken a few nights ago; tension was building.

"Tonight, Staley's gun-slicks, including you, go out there posing as Bar-J cowhands."

"What?"

"Soft, Kid. . . Yep, that's the game: to make trouble. You'll break through Bearpaw fence and run off a few head of stuff. Then some of Adam Grace's gun-slicks will just happen along. *Happen,* sabe? There'll be a fake gun battle. You'll have some extra ponies along—ponies bearing the Bar-J brand. They'll be captured as evidence."

"IT DOESN'T make sense," Solo said from the corner of his mouth.

"Danged if it don't. The Bearpaw trigger slammers keep right on going to the Bar-J and shoot the hell outa it. They got good excuse, see? And soon the Jormons'll get sick of battling the Bearpaw and pull their pins too. Then they'll be another outfit for the Staley-Grace combination to take over."

"But the Law—"

Jones jabbed him in the spine and both watched the play at the table as Mike Staley himself moved around to the other side of it. After a couple of minutes, Staley went away. Amigo Jones spoke again.

"They's one unwritten law on the Yucca range, Kid. That is to retaliate when you're struck at. And the Bearpaw will have evidence in those ponies that the Bar-J tried to bust through their fence. This is some kind of a land grab."

The Kid nodded as the house dealer threw down a full house only to have it beaten by four treys. "You got a plan?"

"Uh-huh. It's risky though. Listen close: Staley's boys will come out of Longhorn Canyon to hit at Bearpaw fence. Just south of the canyon mouth they's a little ol' stubby chomney butte; I'll be down there. If, when they go through the fence, you can slip down there unseen—we can both cut down on 'em from the flank."

"And, Amigo?"

"Neither Staley nor Adam Grace can afford to have any Staley hired hands found dead around the spot. They won't take much pushing to get the blazes out. It'll be one Staley move that blows up in his face. And afterwards, if necessary, we can warn the Bar-J of an attack. *Sabe?*"

"I got it," the Kid whispered. "And you're holding all aces, Amigo. We—"

The next instant, face shoved forward lugubriously, Amigo Jones was wheedling, "Aw, say, mister. Can't you spare a gent a buck. I had a tough break. I'll git it back to you afore morning and—"

"Git on your way, saddle tramp," one of the house guards was saying to Amigo Jones, swinging him around and shoving him toward the door. Shoulders hunched, Jones limped out.

* * *

THERE were a small bunch of riders already up the creek at the riven willow when Solo Strant rode up. Drawn guns glinted for a moment. Then Sudden, in the saddle, pushed out from behind some alders, called and recognized the Kid. But under the low-hung butter chunk of moon, the others were practically faceless with their hat brims yanked low. After a spell some more riders trailed in, singly or in pairs, until there were almost a score in all.

"All right, you gunnies," Sudden spoke from the center of a ring of ponies. "Most of ya know the idee. We're cutting some Bearpaw fence tonight and stampeding some stuff through. It'll be easy. But remember; if any interference comes from the Bearpaw side of the wire—shoot over their heads."

"Still sounds locoed to me," one of them remarked.

"Who in thunder asked you to do the thinking!" Sudden growled back. "There won't be no real trouble and nobody's in any danger. But shoot high if any Bearpaw boys come at us. Let's get going."

As they wheeled away, the lynx-eyed Kid raked them; but he was unable to pick out any man among them with a missing right hand. There was only Sudden with that arm gone.

CHAPTER XII

THEY PUSHED northward. The Kid studied his own position; it was extremely confused. The whole setup here in the Yucca country was a maze to him and it seemed as if he were getting nowhere on the trail of Ryerson, the Killer. When he'd gone to Staley after returning from putting out Osage Copp's light, the underworld boss had said it was unfortunate to lose George, the man who had gone with him. But he had shown a new interest in the Kid, even giving him a slug of some Spanish

brandy he'd said came up from Mexico.

"You called Copp out and faced him square on the draw, eh," Staley had weighed it. "Hmmmm. And he never even hit you, eh?" Later, he had added, "Some trigger slammers, Gunner, are fast with lead but awful damned slow between the ears. You're fast with a gun, all right; stay smart and you'll go places with Mike Staley."

It was a half promise of being taken into Staley's confidence in the future. But the Kid didn't have all year to wait; time was like a rope burning close down to its butt end. Soon he would have to force the play if he were to hang the deadwood on Lefty Ryerson before it was too late.

They passed a hoeman's place on a hillside and cut away from the main trail. A few miles onward they sighted a darkened ranch-house in a hollow. Somebody said that was the Bar-J. The lump of moon mounted higher but lacy clouds veiled it thinly. Solo hoped they didn't clear away. It was a risky hand he was playing now, and a slipup, being identified by one of the outfit when he threw in with Amigo—would mean his finish with Staley. Outside of the chance of being hunted down and killed, it would about eliminate his chances of ever digging up Ryerson.

He would have sided with Amigo Jones anyway because he knew the whole job for the night was a dirty crooked frameup. But there was an added incentive. It was a thin chance, but still a chance. If Staley's men took a bad beating, the boss might deem it necessary to bring Ryerson out from wherever he was holed up. The Kid muttered a brief prayer for that as he rode.

They skirted a shallow creek and took a cowpath in single file through a huge field of chaparral. Then they passed into a canyon with sharp shaly sides. "Bearpaw fence ain't far ahead," one of the men mentioned. Sudden moved back, warning them all again about shooting over heads if men came at them on the other side of the fence. They emerged from the mouth of the canyon on a sandy brush-dotted flat and newly-stretched barbed wire glittered out ahead. On the other side of the wire the land sloped upward gently with scattered clumps of trees. Sudden passed the word that the cow critters were in a small bunch in a hollow over there.

"Get them hosses with the Bar-J brands ready." Two men came up leading half a dozen ponies. Everything had been arranged down to the last detail. Sudden ordered them tethered back in the canyon opening. "And don't stampede 'em like danged fools when we make tracks outa here," he warned.

ADVANCING, the men spread out—some nervously. Down to the south the Kid made out the sawed-off chimney butte Amigo had described. He wondered if Amigo were there. Then there was the snap of wire cutters beneath some trees shadowing the fence line. They moved forward through the gap. At the same moment a heavier cloud blacked out the moon completely for a few moments. The Kid veered his cayuse to the south quickly as the first riders drummed at a gallop toward the hollow across the line. Somebody had begun to yell.

A vague shape that turned out to be Amigo Jones spurred from behind the butte. "Kid?" he called, then laughed quickly when Solo identified himself. "Let's git at 'em!" They both wheeled and headed back as another cruising bar of cloud laid a barrier like a black band across the moon face. Staley riders were milling indecisively up inside the break in the fence.

There were a couple of shots up among the trees. The Bearpaw pack had moved in and the sham battle was under way. Livid stabs of muzzle flame slashed the night. "Let 'em have it in their tail feathers!" cried Amigo and the first report of his smokepole punctuated the remark. The Kid flung into action as he reined up by a clump of high brush. He was only firing with one hand, his right.

A Staley rider swayed in the kak

as he was hit, then wheeled his pony and dashed back through the fence gap for the canyon. Another was knocked from the saddle but grabbed at the bridle reins and caught his animal. He was dragging himself back into the kak as he went north up inside the Bearpaw fenceline. A third went larruping back for the canyon. It was the shock that was stampeding them; they had been told there would be no real trouble. The first Bearpaw men coming at them straight on had been firing in the air.

"We got 'em going," sang out Amigo as he steered his cayuse toward the shadow at the fence line. "We—"

The Kid had just rammed fresh shells into his hogleg. And then the ubiquitous deadly-cool Sudden rose from nowhere to spike the works again. A fleeing rider, headed for the safety of the canyon, pulled up in a sliding stop. A slug had vented his sombrero and another had nicked him in the flesh of the left arm. And Sudden's bared head and shoulders came into sight around the side of a high sharp-pointed boulder on the sand flat. He had fired at one of his own men.

"Git down there and git 'em!" Sudden bellowed. "There ain't many of the snakes!" Next he was roaring to the Bearpaw bunch who had halted back inside the fence at the sudden switch in things, bawling to them to get in there and help. The pell mell retreat was stemmed.

The tide was due to turn with a bang, Solo realized. There were too many of them, if they joined up, for him and Amigo to hold off. The Kid's gun got hot, then he shifted it for his second that he hooked off the hip with his good arm as they fell back. He and Amigo kept cutting and swinging as they retreated. One Staley rider hit the ground, bounced limply, and lay still after the Kid dropped his horse. An hombre coming down the fence line screamed with pain as Amigo pumped lead.

"Let's bust the breeze, Kid, and—" Amigo's sidling horse stumbled and went down rolling. Jones was tossed clear but he lay stunned from a stone bruise on the forehead.

Bearpaw riders, rallied by Sudden's bossing, were piling through the gap in the wire now. Over to the other side, the Kid's right, men on foot were running through the brush in an attempt to outflank him. But the Kid wheeled over beside the downed Amigo and held his ground. He wasn't forgetting how Amigo had come to his rescue in Fenton's Flats.

What would happen seemed a foregone conclusion. For a few moments they held back in the face of the Kid's deadly gunfire. There was a scrawny cottonwood a few feet away and he was half masked in its shadow. Sudden's roar came across the night, driving them on. Amigo Jones staggered up, catching at the bridle of his rising horse; but he was still stunned, unaware of what was happening, unable to mount.

There was a cry of warning from a Bearpaw rider on the slope, then the fresh racket of gunfire as a handful of riders came piling out of the trees higher up. Fresh muzzle flashes blossomed on the night. A Bearpaw saddle was suddenly emptied. They turned and tried to defend themselves on that side of the fence. But the new horsemen were already off and kneeling in the deep grass. Rifles spattered their glowing powder flashes in the darkness.

It was over for the time, almost like that. The Bearpaw gun-slicks began to pile off their own rangeland through the fence hole. They came headlong down on Sudden's pack, then all were driving into the dark safety of the canyon, unable to make a stand against that rifle fire.

The Kid had already jumped down and was trying to help the still reeling Amigo back into the hull. It was tough work with the Kid's one good arm. Just as he got Amigo up, the new arrivals came swinging through the cut fence and bore down on them.

"WHO are—oh, hello, Amigo!" It was Susan Grace, in the lead, who called out. She was disguised in the coat of a man's suit

buttoned to her neck and with a bandanna lashed across the lower half of her face. Then she saw and recognized the Silver Kid.

Amigo said, "Holy sweet Pete! I danged near spoiled that show myself, didn't I?"

Susan leaned from the saddle, "You two—you broke up that bogus rustling job?. . . .Just the two of you?" She faced the Kid, eyes soft with admiration over her half mask. They sat stirrup to stirrup. Her voice had a little catch in it. "Mr Strant, perhaps I've been all wrong about things. Maybe—maybe I'm just beginning to understand now."

Before the Kid could answer, one of the men with the girl said the horsehoofs up the canyon had stopped pounding. That meant the blind flight had stopped. They'd reform their ranks and come scouting back.

"We've got to get out of here." She leaned from the hull and squeezed the Kid's arm. "Come onto the other side of the fence and get into that gulch to the south."

They scattered quickly before the gun-pack came prowling back to discover what a picayune handful they were. Solo and Amigo Jones got into the gulch safely, the latter still in considerable of a daze. At a creek he removed the black eye patch and doused his head and said he felt better.

"Can you get back and square yourself all right?"

Solo nodded. "Sure thing, fella. I'll tell Staley a whopdinger of a yarn about being cut off from the others and danged near getting drilled full of holes. How about you?"

"I already told Adam Grace I was sloping over to Fenton's Flats so I'm not even supposed to be in this part o' the country . . .Kid, they was something I wanted to tell you, but it seems to uh been knocked clean outa my head. She was right important too—to you, at least." He said he'd ride on with the Kid another mile or two to see if it did come back.

They got onto a cart track that ran down to a gate in the south fence of the Bearpaw. The Kid passed through as Amigo sat frowning and rubbing the bump on his forehead. He finally shook his head; it wouldn't come back. "But it was something you'd want to know, I remember."

THERE was little question of squaring himself when he got back. It was about dawn but a light burned in Staley's house and Sudden was there trying to explain what had happened. Two others, who had been scattered in the opening skirmish, had drifted in alone like the Kid. Sullener than ever, Sudden kept treading up and down the carpet.

"Somebody got leaky-lipped; they must. Somebody was out there who knew our plans in advance," he kept saying. His lifted his scowling face to study the Kid, then shook his head. "Nope. Couldn't uh been you. You didn't know nothing till we met at the creek. I didn't tell you nothing. But somebody knew and—"

There was a crashing chord from the piano where Mike Staley sat. "Stop saying that 'somebody.' You failed, Sudden, and I don't like men who fail." He filled the room with another crashing bar.

The Kid left and went back to Reilly's in town to bed down. The next day he was able to take his left arm out of the homemade sling though it still functioned stiffly. He drifted around the town as a slow cold rain fell but there was no talk of any alleged Bar-J raid on the Bearpaw. The thing had fallen through completely.

"But I'm not any closer to spotting that Ryerson as far as I can see," the Kid admitted when he spoke with Mort Royson later.

"Maybe we oughta go back to Hogarth," the sharp-faced cousin of the doomed man said gloomily. "Maybe something's turned up there."

"Small chance. No, if Ryerson's vanished, there still is that gent who rushed into Mack's hotel room and gave him the dinero."

"We know partically nothing about him—except that crazy piece of paper. But back in Lucas maybe we

could—why maybe we could find out who *really* killed the man Mack's charged with murdering. Sure."

Solo's lips pursed; he had never thought of that angle. But he shook his head. "I'll play out the string here till the last moment." They parted, Mort shaking his head pessimistically. The Kid saw him turn into the little dance-hall where he had first encountered him in Yucca. It was strange to think of the colorless watery-eyed Mort as having been attracted by some girl there. He didn't seem to have that much red blood in his veins.

The drear, bedraggled landscape was enough to depress anybody's spirits. And the Kid had to face the possibility that only failure awaited him now as he trudged through mud puddles back to Reilly's.

A half-starved breed younker whistled softly from an alley. "You Strant?" he asked, finger-scraping an ear with a blank look. When the Kid nodded, the breed boy said tersely, "Fella, he wait to see you down trail to west. Fella like this." He clapped a hand over an eye to indicate a patch. "He say you understand. You just ride down west trail."

THE Kid got it. Amigo Jones. Tossing the boy a silver dollar, the Kid took a looksee around. The ubiquitous Sudden was in sight nowhere. Solo got his horse and left the range town by one of the side streets. Taking a round-about route, he reached the trail westward. Over the other side of a rise there was a small mesquite jungle on the left. He was halfway past it when a whistle halted him again. Amigo Jones walked out, shaking his rain-dripping Stetson and leading his pony.

"Howdy, Kid, I remembered what it was I wanted to tell you last night so I forked in . . . . .When we first met and I mentioned Ryerson—"

"Ryerson? You know where—"

"Maybe. I mentioned him and you seemed a heap interested. You also said you was looking for a gent. I can put two and two together. Or am I right?"

The Kid's hand was already plucking at his throat where the tiny life-like silver skull was usually strung. "Maybe."

"Well, Ryerson was there at the fence fight last night!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE Kid dropped to the mud. "With the Bearpaw bunch?"

"No, 'course not. With Staley's men."

Solo inspected Amigo's bruised forehead. Occasionally a stiff bump on the skull did scramble up a man's thinking for a spell. "I didn't spot him and I looked them over closely. You sure? You mean Lefty Ryerson?"

"Sure I know; couldn't miss him. He was heading the bunch. Only nobody but outsiders call him 'Lefty,' Kid. He hates it. To the boys with him, he's 'Sudden.' "

That time the Kid actually did gasp. But again he was puzzled. "Shucks, Amigo. Ryerson has his right hand missing, I know. Now Sudden, his whole right arm—almost—it's gone."

Amigo stared, then chuckled. "Sure. But he's Ryerson; I oughta know. Only he lost that right arm in a drunken gunfight one night down at Swellfork. It was right after the bank robbery; I know it well. His right hand always had been missing."

It was so simple, so obvious, it struck the Kid very like a blow. It was just a freaky thing that Ryerson should be known as "Lefty" but addressed by the Staley outfit as "Sudden." And it was a grim jest of Fate's that he should be looking for a missing right hand and the man thus crippled in the meantime should become more so. Realization that he might never in time discovered who Sudden really was hit with a shock.

Then he had a grip on himself, was his old icy-nerved trigger-brained self. "I'm grabbing him off, Amigo."

"He's the gent who can save this fella in prison due to be strung up?" Amigo Jones asked.

The Kid nodded. "That's him. Getting him to talk, and then to go back

to Hogarth alive to testify, that's going to be a heap big problem."

Amigo Jones' lone eye was boring deep. He tongued his lips quickly. "I had him marked for killing, Kid."

"You'll be signing an innocent man's death warrant for keeps if you do that, Amigo."

They stood, stares interlocked, weighing each other. Amigo gave the quick soft smile. "I'll make you a deal, Kid, You get your man; all right. Then—shucks, I'll even help you handle him. But then—you side me in the showdown here. It's coming *pronto prontito* by all the signs. Adam Grace thinks Staley pulled the double-cross on him this time—I mean about last night."

THE Kid thought a second, then stuck out his hand. They shook on it. The while they smoked down half a quirly apiece in the rain, he made his plans. "All right. First off, I'll need a place to take him where I can work on him and—uh—convince him he's going to talk when he gets back to Hogarth."

"I know about a couple of killings Sudden could hang for; that should help. Might be a good idea to keep him hid out and off the trails a spell 'cause Staley'll put on a hunt for him." Amigo rubbed the black eye patch. "Couple miles down the creek they's an old cave. They'd never search for him that close."

The Kid agreed on that. Amigo wanted to know how Solo planned to snatch him out of town. The Kid shrugged. "I'll have to see how things go. Mebbeso I might say you're hiding outside of town and know about the double-cross at the fence-line last night."

They discussed a few other things. Amigo offered to go in and help get Sudden, but the Kid turned that down, thinking about the loose but effective Staley organization. He didn't know what other gent straying along the Yucca street might be on Staley's payroll. And they would be around Sudden.

"No. I'll just have to see what I can work out. Sudden feels danged bad about failing last night; Staley rubbed it into his hide. I think he'll do anything to restore his rep with the boss. Now there's a fella, Mort Royson." He explained about the doomed man's cousin. Said that if they got trapped somewhere with their prisoner, Mort might be slipped out to get word to the sheriff at Hogarth about the new evidence.

"I'll send him out here to meet you on the trail and wait for me, Amigo." The Kid swung up.

Amigo Jones cocked his head in the thin slivers of rain. "If anything goes wrong and Staley catches you—you are working alone on this. *Si*, my friend?" He spat into the mud. "Staley, he has ways of unbuttoning a man's mouth. So . . . ."

The Kid's mouth twisted in a snear. "I'm neither lily-livered nor a traitor. Jones."

"*Si*. Good; I knew. Good luck, my friend."

Icy fury began to churn in the Kid as he got back to Yucca and turned to Mort Royson's boarding house. He thought of how the real slayer, for whom Mack Royson was on the verge of hanging, would still get away wtih the thing. And it was maddening that Ryerson, Sudden, who might be hard as Satin himself to handle—that he held innocent Mack Royson's fate in his hands.

MORT wasn't at the house. Mom Evans said he had come in and gone out again. Solo headed for that dance hall, shoving his lithe body impatiently through the rain. And his brain, doubly alert now, recalled an almost forgotten incident. That was how he had been arrested at the settlement over to the east of Yucca. The deputy marshal said somebody had tipped them that he was Ralph Devons and had had a hand in that bank robbery. Now the Kid wondered if it had been the wily shrewd Amigo, doing it to throw suspicion from himself. There was another possible angle, a thing he had weighed at the time. It had almost seemed as if some enemy, who perhaps knew his

mission, had attempted to stop him in that manner.

His wet boot-heels clattered on the floor of the now still unused dance-hall. Mort Royson came worming out of a booth. "J-just having a little chat with Maria here," he said embarrassedly. It was the dark-skinned plump-faced girl.

Solo had the impression of having seen her before—and not in that sleazy dance-hall. It came to him. She had been eating in the back of that General Store in the settlement where he had been arrested by the town marshal of Yucca. It seemed unimportant at the moment. He had bigger business on his mind. Drawing Mort out to the door, he told him he had located Ryerson.

Mort's eyes bounced around in his face like frightened jack-rabbits looking for a place of refuge. "But you haven't nabbed him yet?" He said it almost hopefully.

"I've cut his sign, and I'm getting him. Having to keep him alive makes it hard. But—" He broke off to give Mort the instructions about going down the trail to meet Amigo Jones at the mesquite patch.

Mort sleeved at his forehead. "But suppose he isn't there. What'll I do? Why this Ryerson might come along—"

Solo looked slightly disgusted and dropped his voice even lower as he realized the dance-hall girl was edging over to listen. "You don't know ol' Amigo. He'll be there. Git some starch in your backbone, Mort. Slip up on your end and I'll larrup you with a gun butt all the way back to Hogarth."

AFTER Mort had left to get his pony, Solo Strant went on the prowl for Sudden Ryerson, but the big one-armed man—who had a trick of always popping up and watching—wasn't around. Down at the *Oasis*, looking pale and slightly hollow-faced was Staley. But no Sudden. Moving back up the road, he ran into a red-headed hairpin he knew lived at Reilly's like he himself did. Working on the hunch he was one of the outfit, the Kid asked about Sudden.

"Picked up a little piece of information I'd like to parley over with him," he said confidentially.

The other snorted with a few drinks under his belt. "Hell, Sudden's out at Staley's house, brooding like a freshly dehorned bull; always does when he gits crossed."

The Kid headed out there grimly, ignoring the rain that had plastered his shirt to his body. He knew everything hung on his next few moves. He had to play them close to his chest and quickly when the action broke or Mack Royson would soon stretch his neck up in State Prison. Passing the house, he took the side road into the woods and came out behind the old barn.

Then it seemed as if it were going to be easier than he could have believed. The regular guard wasn't propped on a chair just inside the rear door. It was Sudden Ryerson himself slumped there. And on a box beside him stood a whiskey bottle three-quarters empty. He was half orey-eyed and broody with his eyes veined with temper. For once not on his guard, he shifted but made no move to rise.

"By grab, you give me the hoss laugh, Gunner, and I'll ventilate ya where you stand!" he growled and fumbled at the Colts that lay in his lap. "Somebody got leaky-mouthed and spoiled that raid last night," he began. "Some got leaky-mouthed and if I ever catch up to 'em. . . " It went on like a litany.

Riding a little past him into the dimness of the big dank-smelling barn, Solo dropped off unhurriedly as if nothing were on his mind. "Say, Sudden, I picked up a tip. It's about a gent called Jones, Amigo Jones. I figured you might be the one who could work with me and impress the boss. Now—" The Kid was moving nearer him.

"Boss!" The last word was all Sudden caught. But he gripped his pistol and lifted it in anger. He raised his thickened voice against the spatter of rain on the roof. Jabbed toward a piece of paper and stub of pencil on the box beside the redeye bottle. "Gotta write a letter to my widowed sister. She needs some din-

ero. Go and ask that danged Staley for a little something on the cuff and he turns me down. Sore as a boil 'cause of that trouble out at the fence las' night, the danged chunkheaded ol'—" He waved the gun around.

"Look, Sudden. Maybe I know something about that fence affair. Maybe this Amigo Jones—Amigo Jones, I said. Hear me?"

"Jones?" repeated Sudden stupidly. "Now I sorta remember somebody by that handle." Trying to think, he put down the gun to get the bottle.

"Maybe I can do you a favor," the Kid went on as he casually eased closer. He had to play it with extreme caution because it would be useless to take Sudden Ryerson dead.

"Do me a favor?" The half-drunken man looked up with a surprised smirk. "Here. Take a drink, Gunner. Mebbe you ain't such a bad polecat after all. This Jones, now. . . " He was holding out the bottle, watching it.

THE Kid closed in tigerishly and he sent the bottle spinning backward and sloshing whisky over the astounded Sudden Ryerson. A stab of his hand and the Kid had plucked the Colts from the one-armed hombre's lap.

"Get up, Sudden!" the Kid purred. "Stand! And put your dewclaws atop your head. We're riding. We're going places, Sudden, you and me." The Kid's eyes, sleepier-looking than ever, were bare cuts in his face.

Sudden rose, abruptly sober, eyes focussing. Then he let out a roar of laughter that seemed to rattle the barn eaves. "Hell, Gunner, is this a joke your a-playing?" he bawled. "I'm a dangerous gunny, y' know!"

The Kid should have known. Sudden was too smart. A plank creaked. From the corner of his eye he saw the two-gun-slicks who had been napping on the straw in a cell. One was already moving on him as he drew. The other, up on one knee, clawed at his lashed-down holsters. And at the same moment, swinging his lone powerful arm, Sudden sprang.

CHAPTER XIV

THE BARN shook as wind-driven rain whipped against it. Catlike, the Kid half ducked and twisted away from big Sudden Ryerson's blow. Leaping fast as a recoil, Solo slapped Sudden across the side of the head with his gun barrel; Sudden sagged in the middles, broke at the knees, then went down unconscious.

If the Kid could have shot Sudden, it would have been different. Then, he would have already been spraying lead as he pivoted. The gun nose, that of Sudden's Colts, had banged against the stall wall and was bounced from the Kid's hand. With only his right arm working speedily enough, the Kid made a single cross-arm draw from his left hip. Lead was already slicing by him. But even though gunmen by profession, they weren't the deadly controlled trigger slammers Solo was. Two bullets whizzed by harmlessly as he scuttled sideward.

Then his silver-stocked weapon churned its ugly death chant. The first man bounced off a post as if kicked by a mule. He came stumbling forward on stiffening legs like a dummy, a foolish grin smeared over his face. But he was already dead, heart drilled in the very center. A bullet scraped splinters close to the Kid's spread feet; another bit into a saddle slung on a peg just beyond him. But his lead made that second one with his protruding buck teeth hunt cover in a stall midway down the line.

"Come outa there or be carried out feet first!" Solo cried to him. There wasn't a single second to waste.

Gambling daringly as thick-skulled Sudden stirred with a moan, Solo darted silently down into the barn toward that stall that held the gunman. The other's gun muzzle inched into sight as he prepared to peep for a shot. Then the Kid's boot caught in a split plank and he plunged forward, off balance. The pair collided heavily at the corner of the stall.

With his still stiff left arm, the Kid just barely succeeded in beating the other's hogleg upward and half

out of his grip. But the killer, sensing that he was cornered by an expert at his own business, flung himself on the slighter Kid and grappled wildly.

THEY flung around the open space before the stalls in a kind of crazy dance, careening and wobbling. The Kid's head recoiled under a bony fist's pounding, but, chopping his gun up from behind the other's back, he landed a blow on the other's head, batting off his sombrero. Solo was slammed back savagely against a post so that his senses spun. He got in another blow with his arm locked so he couldn't get it from behind his assailant. The gent sagged and his last blow died halfway. His up-jerking knee drove a stab of agony through the Kid's body. But then the other, very drowsy looking, fell away.

Half blinded by pain, sickened to the core, the Kid hacked away desperately with the gun barrel in his wobbly hand. He finally hit at nothing and realized the gunman was sprawled at his feet. The Kid became sick to his stomach from the groin blow, retching. But after a minute, he had control of himself.

Something about the man he had pounded down made him bend close when he had recovered his strength. In the drab light, a yellow tinge was already staining the hairpin's countenance, the Kid realized. The repeated blows had cracked the man's skull and his chips were cashed.

For a moment, the Kid's mouth twisted, he genuinely abhorred killing. But it had been a case of these men or perhaps the life of the innocent Mack Royson up in prison—and they were a pack of gun coyotes at best.

Swiftly he went to work. Sudden had his eyes open but was still dazed as Solo lashed his arms behind him with a pigging string. Then the Kid spotted that letter Sudden had left unfinished. Across the bottom of it he printed in rude letters, "Sudden went haywire." Then he placed the letter under the outstretched hand of the one dead of the cracked skull, dropping the pencil beside it. It would look as if he'd scrawled it in his death throes.

It was a cruel ruse but it would change the whole attitude of any pursuit that might develop. And everything depended on getting Sudden Ryerson back to Hogarth in safety. The boyish-faced Kid could be ruthless when circumstances demanded it. When he took a looksee at Staley's house, he breathed a prayer of thanks to Heaven. In the wind and the rain, the gunfighting had not apparently been heard.

Inside of another few moments he was riding out of the back side of the barn into the woods with Sudden Ryerson helpless on his horse beside him. He had thrown an old coat around Sudden's shoulders so to a casual onlooker there would be no suspicion that he was a kidnapped prisoner. Solo carried his own smokewagon bared and ready after reloading.

WITHOUT repassing Staley's house, he went on down the main trail with the bleak rain shrouding them. The dimness of early twilight was settling. Luck was with the Kid. They encountered nobody till Amigo Jones glided from the mesquite trailed by Mort. Sudden had said not a single word; his eyes merely widened in recognition at sight of Amigo.

They struck southward across the country toward where the creek looped away from Yucca Bluffs. The Kid saw the chances of success rising. The rain wiped out all track sign. Swinging into the shallow muddy creek waters, they continued downstream to where a big elbow of rock formation formed a sharp bend. Amigo drew over beside the Kid, bent his lone eye on him.

"Remember our deal, Kid. . . I owe this Sudden a score, and I hate to give him up. That means you string with me for the showdown here. That right?"

"I got a swell memory, Amigo. That's right."

Amigo nodded and led the way around the elbow and into the bank

under overhanging red willows. Dropping off, they tethered the ponies. Amigo pushed ahead and seemed to be walking at solid rock, but when he struck a match, they saw the cave mouth. It was wide, about shoulder high, with a small ledge overhanging it so it seemed like a mere indentation at first. From inside Amigo called as he appeared in the glow of a candle stub in a bottle neck. It was a water-dripping chamber set off to the right of the entrance, high enough to stand erect in. It was about fifteen feet square, lopsidedly round in shape. Over in a low corner was a rude bunk.

"Holed up here at times myself," Amigo said. "Now let's get to work on our friend Sudden."

Sudden spoke for the first time. "You lunkheads'll never git away with this. You're signing your own death orders, by grab." He attempted a laugh. "You can kill me, mebbe. But when Staley—"

"Maybe we aren't a-going to kill you, Sudden," Solo said. "Maybe you got a good memory. 'Member a man called Mack Royson who was back this way a month or so ago." He described him, nodding toward Mort, his cousin. "Looks a heap like him. Same size and all."

Sudden blinked at the light Amigo had set on a little ledge of rock in the wall. His gaze switched to Amigo as he nodded. "Yep, I remember him. We always figured he was tied up on that bank job. With you," he added to Amigo.

The Kid glanced over at the latter. He was helping all he could; he had lfited his eye patch away from his face a moment so that Sudden recalled him. And by association, Mack Royson.

"He wasn't in on the bank job," the Kid said. "But—"

"You ain't a-claiming I killed him?"

"No, Sudden. At least you haven't sent him to his death yet." He let that mystify him. "Not yet. . . But he's accused of murdering a man over in Hogarth—at the time he was here in Yucca. Sabe? You're the man who can get him cleared."

SUDDEN caught the idea quickly. His half bald head thrust out and he smirked at the Bowie blade the Kid had drawn suggestively. "Me go over to Hogarth and put myself in the hands of the John Laws? Haw-haw! You go to hell. I ain't no fool. Oh, no-o. Go ahead; kill me. But—"

Amigo eased forward. "We'd save ourselves that trouble."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that I know of a killing you did at Dayton Crossing about two years ago. Smitty was the poor devil's name. And I know where to find the witnesses to that killing too, Sudden. Also, friend, there was another slaying in Yellow Horse shortly after that. That faro dealer. Remember him? You paid off a dance-hall girl to keep her lip buttoned up, but I could make her tell plenty in a courtroom. So-o, friend, we just turn you over to the Law at either place and—"

The effect was surprising after Amigo spoke so quietly. Sudden's big face shot open and his bleached eyebrows climbed. The Kid, cutting his eyes around, saw pale Mort Royson's hands clench, especially the one bearing the Kid's own half-healed bullet scar. Sudden made a wheezing sound and twisted his head on his neck as if choking some.

"Holy Gawd, they'd *hang* me," he cried out. "*Hang* me!" It was obvious; the king gunman, unafraid of death in a fight, was terrified of the noose. He who had hung so many men for Mike Staley had his weak spot. Hanging!

"Well—" Solo started. And the sound of horses moving through the brush somewhere outside carried into the cave.

Amigo hauled gun irons and started forward. The Kid stood in his tracks. "Come on, dang you!" Amigo wispered tensely. "If it's some of Staley's bunch, we gotta go out and get 'em! Come on. One man could keep us penned inside the cave mouth while the other went back for help. Then we'd be sunk. Shake a leg!" Bending, he headed for the outside through the angling little tunnel. The

Kid followed, realizing the sense in it.

They crouched down by the stream. A voice came vaguely to them. The splash of a pony's hoofs in the creek. Amigo said he'd cross the water. "You git up to the top of the bank here, Kid. Let 'em come smack to the entrance, then blast 'em." He moved away.

When he got to the top of the bank, he'd had to move downstream a ways to find a place of ascent. But even in the dimness he could command a view of the water in front of the willows. The Kid brushed water dripping in his eyes from his forehead. For once he was quivering with tension. He knew Sudden was on the verge of cracking. It looked as if he might swear to go to Hogarth and testify to save his neck. Soon—

From behind, voices came through the wet across a cleared space. Turning Solo went toward them, drawing his right gun with his still stiff left arm. Somebody cursed and said, "Danged saddle slipped." A few moments later, livid white lightning gashed the sky face. It revealed two riders, one of them just remounting after he had tightened the girth strap. He almost toppled from the kak after clambering into it. They moved off southward, a couple of orey-eyed cowhands heading home.

The Kid's breath whistled out in relief as thunder mounted from a moan and crashed like a caroming boulder along the northern horizon. And as it ebbed, two quick almost interblended shots snapped through it. A couple of seconds afterward, there was a third report. All came from down by the creek.

SOLO went crashing down the bank, beating at clawing underbrush, sliding in mud. He plunged up through the shallows toward the cave mouth. Amigo came leaping through the water from the other bank. He sniffed the acrid odor of gunsmoke as he piled into the cave behind the Kid. It was bad.

Mort Royson was half sitting against the wall with a glazed-eyed look. A trickle of blood wormed down his pale forehead where he had been hit. And in the center of the floor, unstirring in the guttering candlelight, lay Sudden Ryerson. There was a bullet hole in the front of his vest, and only a small blood splotch reddened the fabric around it. The Kid knew what that meant even as he dropped on his knees beside the jasper.

"What in blazes happened?" Solo barked.

Mort's story, in a shaky voice, was simple and short. "A gent, he come slipping in the tunnel. At first, I thought it was one of you. Then I called to him and he shot at me. I shot back—b-but missed. And—a-and he run in and batted me over the head. Then he shot Ryerson. I saw it even—even as I passed out." He pawed at the lump on his head feebly, making whining sounds.

Amigo had picked up Mort's fallen hogleg, the new one the Kid had bought him at the General Store. "One shell gone," he said as if corroborating Mort's story.

The Kid's eyes grew bleak in his poker face, and he pulled his hand out from inside Sudden Ryerson's chest, shaking his head. Sudden was dead; the heart had stopped beating. He would never tell his story to save the condemned Mack Royson's life. . .

CHAPTER XV

IT LOOKED like the end of the trail, a futile bitter end. There was no sense going out to look for the killer. He would already be away with the rain and darkness making tracking him down impossible. To the Kid, catching the man would be an empty gesture anyway; he couldn't figure it. But the killer would be no help in clearing Mack Royson.

They got their ponies, leaving Sudden's body in the cave, and turned back to town. Mort shivered in the saddle as he rode.

"Reckon we better give up and go back to Hogarth, huh, Kid?" he said through chattering teeth.

Solo knew the chance of picking up the last man who had seen Mack Royson, the nameless one who had

burst into the hotel room and given him that dinero—he knew that chance was slimmer than trying to spit out a prairie fire. He might hang around and stumble on some clue, of course. But—

Then Amigo spoke quietly through the rain and Solo's mind was made up for him. "You made a deal with me, Kid," he said.

The Kid knew he had to stay. He had practically sold himself and his guns into bondage to Amigo Jones. If Sudden had been made to swear to testify, Mort could have returned to Hogarth with the word. A stay in execution could have been arranged, and Sheriff Blanchard could have come in to get Sudden Ryerson.

At the outskirts of Yucca, Amigo left them. He said some of Staley's dope was due in tonight. It was left for him at a crossroads place five-six miles south. He was dropping down to head off the bearer.

"Staley's due to crack as wide open as a saddle-backing barn, soon, Kid. Wait and see." He left.

The Kid let Mort go on in alone. When Solo himself next appeared on the main street, he went reeling into Reilly's place. "Gimme a snort of gila spit," he said thickly to the bigger Reilly brother as if drunk.

The latter shoved a bottle across the bar counter. "Hey, where you been, Gunner? One of the boys was in looking for you." He meant one of the boys on Staley's payroll of course.

The Kid almost overturned the bottle as he splashed out a drink. "Found a right purty little filly," he said with a lugubrious wink. "We was up in one of the shacks by the bluff. A man's gotta have himself some relaxation in this business." He deliberately spilled tobacco on the bar as he fumbled at building a quirly. "Where's Staley?"

Reilly whistled. "Something went haywire. Staley got himself dead drunk this afternoon and had to be helped into the saddle to git home. It was a spell after that one of the boys came looking for yuh."

The last meant the dead men in the barn and Sudden's disappearance had been discovered.

"Eemagine it!" Reilly went on. "Mike Staley—him what never touched a drop—gitting orey-eyed as a buck Injun!"

Solo understood the significance of that. It proved Amigo's contention. Staley, the drug-user, was running out of the stuff; soon the crash would come.

THE Kid downed some dinner though he had no stomach for anything. Failure was hard for the half-pint but deadly confident little hombre to accept easily. Again and again, the picture of the interior of the cave when he and Amigo returned flashed before his eyes: Sudden dead and Mort propped against the wall with the gun-barrel blow lump on the right side of his head.

A thought jumped into the Kid's head: Could it have been Amigo Jones who'd slipped back, knocked out Mort, and killed off Sudden? The scared Mort had been unable to describe the gent more than vaguely. And in the shadows, with a man's sombrero pulled low, it would have been hard to tell much. Amigo was a man with a will of steel, the Kid had realized before this. And perhaps his mind had become slightly twisted with the vengeance scores he had to settle. Amigo could have slain Sudden Ryerson, and in doing so he would have gotten the Kid himself as a sworn ally for the final payoff in Yucca. It was a possibility. Amigo was the breed who would stop at little, and a heap smart in the bargain.

The rain had ceased as he moved restlessly around the Yucca streets during the night. There was no rest for him till he could determine his next move. Looking back over things, it seemed as if he had failed abysmally almost before he was involved in the hunt to clear Mack Royson.

Back at that whisky mill in the Horseshoe Bend country, if he had paid more heed to the conversation emanating from the back room, he could have stepped in and saved Deputy Chan Murphy's life. And then, firing blindly apparently, he'd

had to blast down Red Lyons, the horsethief who could have cleared Royson. How he'd done that, though, he still didn't understand. And now he'd gone and lost Sudden when he'd had him in his hands and on the verge of breaking.

"A danged bungling job all the way down the trail," he muttered in self castigation, turning a corner. Across the road dotted with dark-glittering puddles he spotted the bow-legged gunhand who had been at the drawing of cards at Staley's house that day to determine who would go get Osage Copp. The Kid called out and waved. Might as well find out sooner or later what Staley wanted.

THE man seemed to look his way, but as the Kid called again, the other stared straight ahead and walked quickly up the line. Then he was gone behind a screen of people. It was a little puzzling. The gent must know he was on the same pay-roll with him. As he passed the big veranda of the hotel, he saw Susan Grace on it. He was about to bow, pulling at his hat. But she stared right through him, turned quickly on a heel, and disappeared inside.

"Mebbeso I got the plague and don't know it," the Kid told himself with dry humor. "Maybe I don't smell right. Turning up the side street, he passed an open lot where the fortune teller's tent had been pitched. A hand reached out of a patch of tall grass, a gloved hand. It tapped his shoulder. Like a cat, he was half around with one gun starting from the hoster.

"Solo Strant. . . " And Susan Grace's face showed dimly behind the grass. "Solo, get out of town while you can. Staley's men are looking for you."

"Ma'm, are you locoed?" Nobody could have known Sudden died while his prisoner.

Fear freighted her voice. "Solo—please. Somebody told Staley they saw you leave his barn with Sudden as your prisoner. . . Now, they're combing the town—or beginning to. . . My uncle, Adam, told me."

Sliding a glance over his left shoulder, he saw three men, walking quickly, hands on holster tops, wheel into the side street. Staley men, he realized. A quick stride and he had glided into the grass beside her. She had slipped out through the back of the hotel and come around to warn him. He might return that way and—

A twig snapped sharply some place back further in the open plot. "I didn't dare speak to you on the hotel porch because you might have come up," she whispered close to his ear, her warm breath playing on it. "And three of them were inside the lobby then. And—"

Another piece of wood crackled under an exploratory boot. She clutched him, clinging close. "Solo, we'll go down the street together. They won't dare shoot with me there. They—"

BUT the Silver Kid was hiding behind no woman's skirts; it endangered her too much. Ripping her arms free, he slid his boot behind one of her feet. A quick shove and she toppled backward in the undergrowth. He glided back out into the side street. Immediately there was a bitten-off cry from one of the approaching trio. They ran at him.

He darted up the road and the rise where the adobe jailhouse stood. A bullet sang its mean song feet over his head. Another barked the base of a tree a few feet to one side. Now he understood why that bowlegged Staley gunman had not answered his hail before. The man had not wanted to tackle him alone and had hustled off to find some of the other boys. He raced past the burnt out place even as he heard drumming hoofs come up the street. It was an organized dragnet out for him; some of them were mounted. They exchanged shouts with the ones afoot in his rear.

Making a quick decision, the Kid darted around the front of the jail and into the bare sideyard where the grisly gallows stood. The next moment, on hands and knees, he had ducked under the lynching platform where the trap door to spring a man was. The horsemen pulled up before the dark building, calling. Then the

others came into sight. The Kid could see their running booted legs. They made a complete circle of the jail, came back. Then one of them spoke of the brush-dotted flat off behind the building. Hoglegs drawn and cocked, they moved off that way.

"Remember! Orders are to shoot for his legs only!" one of them warned.

The Kid savvied that at once. Evidently they had not found Sudden's body. They took it for granted that he had him hidden out somewhere and wanted to capture him alive to make him tell where. He waited another few seconds and skulked out and got to the road. Back down it he went.

He felt like a blindfolded man trying to get through a morass. He had to get himself a pony somewhere. Yet, because he had not seen all the Staley bunch, he didn't know what man on the street might be his enemy.

There was an outcry behind him. One of the riders, who had waited up behind the jail, had swung around to the front and spotted the fleeing Solo. The Kid figured to jump into the empty lot, but at the last minute, over the grass tops, he saw three men leaping off the steps of the hotel back porch and come cutting over. There was no shooting then.

HE RAN down the Yucca main stem and dropped to a walk as he calmly turned into it. Hopping a puddle, he got mud-spattered by a passing buggy, then reached the other side and merged with the throng. A dozen yards on he ducked under a hitchrail and lifted the reins of a calico horse in the line there.

A man on the steps of a honky tonk bawled, "Git away from my hoss, you damn—" The Kid glanced over and it was that bowlegged gunslick of the outfit. Doubled, Solo went under the horse's belly. A gun crackled over the din of the business street. The horse was lurching forward onto the knees of its forelegs almost before the Kid was clear. They were determined not to permit him to escape.

Once more he leaped out into the mud of the road, almost under the hoofs of the lead team of burros of an arriving stagecoach. It served as a shield and to block him from sight as he reached the other side. Folks on the sidewalk were staring as they started to seek cover.

"Drunken hombre back there," the Kid told them, jabbing a thumb over his shoulder. "Tried to take his smokepole away from him and he almost shot me, by grab!" He walked unhurriedly through the doorway of a twobit gambling hell as if the last thing he were was a hunted hairpin.

There was a dingy little bar with nobody at it but the fat gold-toothed drink wrangler behind it. In the smokeclouded, narrow rear wing were a handful of men around a monte table. The Kid picked out the open door down at the far end of the bar. He flipped a bill on the counter.

'Give me some of that Golden Stallion I see there," he said pointing at the back of the bar. The somnolent wheezing fat man turned heavily to peer at his array on the back shelf. Doubling, Solo scooted down the bar, rounded it and was through the door in a split second. He closed it silently, standing a moment in the dark corridor.

"Hey, where'd that feller go?" he heard the barkeep wheeze. "He left his dinero an'—"

The Kid catfooted it down the musty-smelling hallway to the rear door and stepped into the yard. He almost fell flat as his left foot came down on a loose rusty tin can. Recovering, he lurched drunkenly a moment. It saved his skin. A shutter of a back window flapped open with a creak, and a big man pushed his shoulders through it and triggered away at the careening Kid. It was one of those who had been at the monte table. Staley men seemed to spring from the ground; it was nerve-shattering.

Lead scratched wicked furrows in the ground about the Kid's boots. Twisting, he snatched out a hogleg and triggered twice. The man in the window doubled across the sill. His sombrero fell half off, dangling foolishly from one ear by the chin

strings. The Kid turned and ran for the corner-sagging horseshed out under a half-dead cottonwood.

LUCK seemed to be with him; there was a saddled-up cayuse inside it. Leading the animal out from under the dripping roof, he hit the leather. A yell went up from the alley beside the gambling hell; two men opened fire on him. Staley men seemed to be wherever he turned. He spurred off, cutting around another outbuilding. As he did, the pony lurched, hesitated, then picked up unsteadily. He knew the animal was hit.

There was a tree-flanked lane running off at a tangent from the main road. But even as he hit into it, moonlight flowed through the dissipating storm clouds and dyed him in shimmering, bright gray light. He cursed it and a minute later turned between two of the ramshackle hovels straggling down the lane. The laboring animal had slowed badly as he got outside the town. He realized he was on the trail westward. As he passed Staley's house he heard the thump of pursuing horses.

Vainly he tried to urge more speed from the poor cayuse. Gun reports carried to him as he rounded a bend. They followed the lead. One report seemed to mushroom and echo and reecho inside his very skull. Then he found himself clutching at the saddle horn and realized he had been hit. It was a scalp wound on the side of the head.

He made his decision quickly. The cayuse was wavering now. He pulled off, hit the ground and saw the red running from a wound in the animal's flank. Then he slapped it with his sombrero and sent it stumbling on along the trail. Turning he floundered into the underbrush.

After the pursuing Staley riders had swept on by, he knew there was only one place for him to hole up. His senses still reeled and he was weak from the smash against his skull. Finally he found the creek and waded doggedly down it till he came to the cave. Before he went in, he sloshed muddy water on the scalp cut and lashed his bandana around it. Inside, he struck a match. Sudden Ryerson's body still lay stretched, unmoved, on the floor. That meant they didn't know about the cave or, at least, hadn't thought of it yet.

With the dead man as company, he propped himself against the wall commanding the entrance and laid his hoglegs at either side of him. If they did find it, it would cost them plenty to take him. But it looked as if his days in Yucca Bluffs were ended. He was a marked man by the Staley outfit.

The last thin chance of finding the man whose card read "The Friend" and bore a drawing of a sombrero—the last living man who could save Mack Royson's neck—seemed gone. The match the Kid had scratched to study that piece of paper for some clue went out. Solo swore bitterly.

CHAPTER XVI

A COUPLE of times through the night he roused himself from fitful cat-naps. Once he dreamed that Sudden had come alive and was trying to slip out, but it was only some prowling night animal in the entrance. He risked a smoke as the first dirty gray light of dawn stained the entrance. The quirly was bitter in his mouth. He went down and gulped some of the yellowish water.

What his next move would be was vague in his mind. He knew he had to get a pony before he could do anything. Mort Royson might have been some help, but the skirt-chasing bank clerk was never around when he was most needed. The Kid even toyed with the desperate trick of trying to grab Staley himself and drag him back to Hogarth. Staley must have known Mack Royson was in the town if Sudden Ryerson, his man, had hunted and tried to kill him. But as he tried another quirly to ease the battering inside his skull, Solo saw how fantastic that idea was. He had nothing to hold over Staley, nothing he could prove, to make him talk. Doggedly the Kid tried to buoy up his sagging spirts.

The thing was to keep level-headed and make rational moves. He had

pledged his word to stick it out here with Amigo Jones to the finish. Once he got a pony and got word to Amigo. . . Mort was the only one who could help him if he could only get him a message somehow. The nervous-eyed, pale Mort would be at that second-rate dance hall with that Maria girl, probably, most of the time. The Kid blinked as something came to him. Mort had called her Maria when the Kid had last found him there. But that first day when he had followed him in there and the girl had thrown herself on him, she had called herself Margarita. He was dead sure of it.

Somebody was splashing in the creek. Snapping from a stupor, the Kid cocked his silver-butted hoglegs. "Hey, Kid! Wake up, it's time for breakfast!" It was the cheerful voice of Amigo Jones. When the Kid poked his head out, Amigo was leading his own and an extra pony into the screen of willows.

"I got some cackle berries and a coupla chunks of steak and some java. We'll have a big feed," Amigo said. . .

DRIFTING back into town after taking care of the messenger with Staley's drug, Amigo had learned the story of the pursuit of the Kid this morning. "When I heard they'd found your wounded horse abandoned so close to town, I had a hunch where you were." Staley's men, he said, believed the Kid had acquired another pony somehow. From a closed-up squatter's place, they had followed another pony's track deep into the hills.

The Kid nodded through qirly smoke and smacked his lips over that side of beef again. "They don't know Sudden's dead yet, of course. Only I can't figure *who* told Staley they saw me leaving the barn with Sudden. I'd uh swore there was nobody around."

Amigo shrugged. "I saw Staley this morning coming into town. He looked like a walkin' ghost." He smiled but this time his teeth met with a satisfied click when he bared them.

The Kid pushed his boot at a coal of the fire that they had extinguished quickly after cooking up the grub. "Somehow, I got a feeling—a real strong one—that they's somebody snaking in the grass in this game. . . some one working under cover that I ain't got no idea of yet. Sounds locoed, I know. But there're too many unexplained things. I got a feeling this somebody has been watching me work all the time. . . only I can't see 'em because I don't know who they are. They—" He broke off, knowing he sounded wind-bellied with that long speech.

But one-eyed Amigo grimaced understandingly. "I know how you feel. It's been that way with me sometimes when I was—well, sometimes. What are your plans, friend?"

The Kid shrugged. "Looks like they're shot up worse'n a sieve-bottomed bucket. . . I've failed. I said I'd side you—so I'm waiting."

Amigo rose, nodding. "Ever think, Kid, that Ryerson couldn't uh been the only Staley hand who knew your friend in prison was in these parts that time?. . . Now come the showdown, and we might come on one o' them fellas what knows."

Solo shrugged. "I've heard of fishing in a water barrel too. But I never saw a gent catch nothing that way."

"Well—anyway, the best thing for you to do now is lay low and hide out somewheres. Won't be more'n a few days. . . Say, remember that hay and feed store in Fenton's Flats?" The Kid did. "Well, it's run by a gent called Chihuahua Charlie, friend of mine. Real nice fella; part Mex. Tell him I sent you and you'll be taken care of. And I can always reach you. Git your heart outa your belly, Kid; something'll break."

IT WAS dusk when the Kid sloped back into Fenton's Flats once more. Chihuahua Charlie was just dousing the lamp in his front window preparatory to closing up. He was a merry-eyed little tub of a man with an olive-hued face. When the Kid mentioned Amigo's name, Charlie's eyes went solemn and he started to cross himself. Sure he could take care of any friend of the Senor Amigo Jones. He himself lived in a little cabin at the edge of town, but that would be dangerous; people came in

and might see the Kid. There was a loft in the back of the store where Solo could sleep. Charlie would bring him his grub.

The Kid slept like a dead man that night, possibly because hope was slain. But the following day, with nothing to do, his brain kept stall-walking. Might-have-beens spurred his conscience. He kept reviewing every move, trying to see where he had erred or what he had overlooked. One thing would not answer itself. Who had slipped into the cave and shot Sudden Ryerson dead? And for what reason?

He did a heap of mental sweating before the sun set that day and it was safe for him to stretch his legs behind the place and get some fresh air. Seen in the daytime, he would have been marked as a stranger. And Mike Staley seemed to have ears everywhere.

It was mid-morning of the second day when Charlie's quick tuneless whistle sounded, the signal to the Kid to get clear of the back of the store and up into the loft. A customer was coming. Upstairs in the small place he could hear the voices fairly clearly. This time he caught a woman's voice, strange for a hay store. He heard Charlie's, *"Non, non,* nobody here but me, mees. I swear eet and—"

"I'm in trouble and I've got to see the Kid!" the girl's voice rose fiercely.

Solo slid down the ladder from the loft and leaped into the store from the storage space behind. It was Susan Grace. She clutched the Kid's shoulders with her gauntleted hands warmly. "You're all right, Solo?"

"Sure, Susan. But what trouble are you—"

She laughed a little, but it did not remove the worry signs from around her mouth and the black smudges of strain beneath her eyes. "No, nothing. I got it from Amigo that you were here. And—well, I knew that if I said I were in trouble that you would come." She flushed.

The Kid grinned sheepishly. They moved back into the storeroom and seated themselves on some bales of hay. At first they were awkward alone with each other. She tapped a boot with a braided quirt. Solo asked permission to smoke. He asked her about the ride down. She said it was all right but that she would be missed at the range.

"My uncle watches me more closely now."

THE Kid's eyes narrowed. Susan had saved his neck once and had warned him of the danger from Staley in town the other night. But she was Adam Grace's niece, and she knew something of the game he was playing, it didn't hook up.

Susan's mind had been working on a like track. "Kid, do you know what kind of a game Amigo Jones is playing?" she asked abruptly.

Smoke drifted up from the Kid's nostrils and masked his eyes. He couldn't help but think of one way Sudden could have been cut down in that cave. "I'm not sure. I like him. . . But one of the most likeable humans I ever knew was strung up from a cottonwood for shooting two gents in the back. And he had done it."

She nodded, eyes growing velvety with thought. Her face made the Kid's blood run faster.

"Y-yes. I like him too. He's real hombre all the way through. But there—well, there's something like a shadow always hanging over him, if you know what I mean. Things he's secretive about—or—or sort of just laughs off. He—he never speaks of his past. And he *is* on my uncle's payroll."

The Kid dropped it bluntly then. "That ought to be enough for you. I understand the Bearpaw is *your* outfit."

She flushed as she read behind his words. Then she told her story. Unwell for years as a child, she had been sent to live with relatives in an Eastern city where she would have the finest medical attention.

"I hadn't seen Dad in a long time when I learned of his death. I came out here and arrived simultaneously with Uncle Adam; I had never seen him before. But he had all the credentials to prove who he was, including a recent letter from my father, his brother." And according to Foster

Grace's will, Adam, his brother, was sole executor of the estate to run the Bearpaw for his daughter.

"Then, after about two years, I sensed something wrong. I still am not certain of what it is—except that Adam is playing some kind of a game outside the Law; any man who deals with Michael Staley is. And Adam and he work together." She looked at Solo to see his reaction.

He nodded to show that he knew that.

"I felt so helpless—there was almost nothing I could do. After all, Adam is my guardian—he has everything tied up." Finally, desperate, she had gotten a couple of men of her own choosing, men secretly under her own hire, into the bunkhouse. And then two more who hid out in the hills. "True, gunmen," she admitted, remembering that former accusation of the Kid's. "I was told I could trust Osage Copp if I paid him enough. Then you—" she broke off.

So Staley had made a slight mistake, the Kid realized. It had been Miss Susan personally, not Adam Grace, who had meant to hire Copp.

SHE put her chin in the palms of her hands, arms propped on the thighs of her riding breeches. "And you—well, I've heard a lot about you, Solo. Of some of the things you've done in the past. Now. . . "

He sensed the unspoken question. "I don't know how much I can help you, Susan. I came to Yucca Bluffs—and have already failed." He told her the story of Mack Royson, waiting to be hung up in the State Prison.

She listened with interest, her face too darkening with disappointment when he told of the mysterious killing of Sudden when the thing seemed almost solved. They remained silent some moments.

She looked up. "Solo, when that Mack Royson was here was when the bank was robbed. Would—would that explain the amount of money he had on him? I mean, was he, perhaps, involved in the robbery. And when he was caught for another thing back home, he made up that trumped-up story about the man with the money in the hotel room rather than admit he robbed the bank."

One of the Kid's hands clenched; he had never thought of that angle. It was possible. Amigo had said he had hired help on the job done for Adam Grace in the double-cross of Staley. Mack could have been one of the helpers. If he asked Amigo and—

It was like speaking of the Devil. There was a scrape of boots on the platform outside. And Amigo Jones slid his body in through the partially opened sliding supply door. His one eye glared and he hissed some sibilant Mexican epithets when he saw them.

"I told you not to try to come here to see him," he snapped at Susan angrily. To Solo: "Adam Grace knows who you are. A new man on the spread recognized you in town that last night and—"

At the counter, Chihuahua Charlie made a squeaking sound. It was too late. The store door had been opened noiselessly. There were running boots down the floor. Then Amigo Jones had his guns jerked and covering the Kid. Solo was helpless as half a dozen of the gunhand spread of the Bearpaw busted in. For the Kid, in his excitement at hearing Susan Grace downstairs, had hustled down from where he lay resting in the loft without restrapping on his hoglegs. He was gunless.

"All right, boys. Here he is," crowed Amigo Jones. "Only I beat you to him! He's my prisoner."

It looked and smelled like the old well-known double-cross. Amigo, the ruthless opportunist, had simply shifted with the winners.

CHAPTER XVII

THEY were gone, Amigo and the gunhands, taking the girl back with them. The Kid lay on a rough pallet in the storage room of the hay store. His legs were trussed. And his left hand was manacled to an upright near the wall with a pair of handcuffs Amigo had produced. He knew he would die soon. But more than that, he felt like an unweaned double-barrelled dyed-in-the wool jackass.

Amigo Jones had played him for a fool from the start.

That seemed evident enough now. A daring adventurer, Amigo had come to his aid that day here because he saw a man he could use, had figured to indebt Solo to him and then handle him like a tool. Playing his wild, still unexplained game, Amigo had used him to help break up that bogus cattle raid at the fence-line. And then he had used him as a pawn to settle his score with Sudden Ryerson. It all seemed very plain now.

The gunhands had wanted to take Solo back to the Bearpaw, but the ever-smart Amigo had over-ridden that. "Boss' orders," he said. "I left after you fellas did. Staley's offered five thousand reward for the capture of this little galoot. So we leave him here, let the boss collect the reward, then tell Staley where this coot is. And Staley will deal with him—don't worry. He'll die the hard way."

He had over-ruled them, and they had all left together after Charlie had received his orders. And the Kid knew Charlie was Amigo's man. In a matter of hours, Staley would arrive . . . . That wasn't pleasant to think about. They would try to torture it out of him where Sudden was. And if and when he admitted Sudden's light was out . . . .

Late in the afternoon, Charlie came in and gave him a plate of stew. He looked very sad about the whole thing. But he kept his distance from the Kid, pushing the bowl over with a stick.

The Kid heard Charlie pulling down the blinds preparatory to closing up. Somebody came up the front steps. There was talk. Charlie came back inside and there was the scratch of a match as he relit a lamp. The sound of paper unfolding. Then the Kid wondered if he were dreaming.

Beaming widely, Charlie came into the back and produced the handcuff key and freed Solo. Next he cut the rawhid binding his ankles. And he shoved a patch of paper with a note on it to the Kid. Solo read:

Release my friend, the Kid. Tell him everything all right. Solo, wait for news from me.

Amigo Jones

The Kid blinked several times, laughed a little. But he still didn't savvy it. Then he scanned the note again. In a vague way, there was something familiar about it . . . .

* * * *

It was the next morning when more news came. Charlie came hustling into the store early, a short hour after sunrise. He hurried back to where the Kid waited in the loft with the Colts cocked.

"The Senor Amigo, he sends the message, Keed," Charlie called. "He says you are to meet him a leetle after sunset at the cave by Yucca Bluffs. He says if you see the sombrero hanging on the tree by the cave you know everytheeng is all right. *Si* . . . ."

THIS was the showdown Amigo Jones had awaited, and it might be a showdown between himself and Amigo, the Kid realized as he neared the cave that evening. The slippery Amigo, switching with the wind, might have decided to use him as a tool again, or it might be a ruse or a trap planned out by Amigo and Adam Grace, the man he worked for. The Kid weighed those things as he approached the cave upstream this time. He had looped deep into the south to avoid running into any Staley hands. Then he rounded a bend and saw Amigo's sombrero bobbing in the breeze on a Spanish bayonet stalk.

Amigo was hunkered just inside the cave entrance. "Howdy, Kid. You—" Then his hands jumped to his gun butts. For the Kid was standing in the gunman's slaunchwise stance, body hooked over slightly, arms dangling loose in that dangerous way of the professional trigger slammer.

"You and me's got things to git outa our craws, Amigo."

Amigo spoke without his lips stirring around the dead quirly stub in his teeth. "So?"

"Yep. If this is another trick, you'll be seeing the last of me through gunsmoke."

"Go ahead, Kid."

"Things don't hook up true, Amigo. You come into the store and jump me and hand me over to those gun-hawks and—"

Amigo spat out the stub. "Would you uh wanted a lotta lead spraying with the girl in the thick of it?"

"They wouldn't dare take a chance on blasting down the boss' niece, Amigo."

"Kid, I have reason to doubt that. They might have."

"Then how did you square things with them other six when you got back to the ranch?"

Amigo leaned back against the rock, relaxed. "They never got back, Kid. I waited my chance going back on the trail. Four of 'em are laying trussed up in a blind canyon down the line. Some day I might drop down that way and release 'em. The other two argued. They can argue with *El Diablo* about their releases."

Solo weighed it. After all, he was free.

"DON'T you savvy, Kid? When the girl went to see you, she led them right to your hideout. Adam's been having her watched every moment. Minute I learned she'd left in the night, I hit the trail and passed them six just outside of the Flats. When they busted in—and with you gunless—I had to deal it like I did." Slowly he reached into his holsters, hooked his guns by the trigger guards with his thumbs, lifted them out. Then he dropped them on the leaf mould at his feet.

"Want anything else, Kid? You got me if you want me now."

The Kid grinned sheepishly. "I apologize, Amigo. I—"

"Forget it, Kid. You swore to side me, and I'm counting on you. The big payoff is tonight."

"Yes."

"It's the bank again."

Solo swore. "Shucks, they wouldn't try to work that one again, would they?"

"She's different this time. They're going to burn the bank down. Sure."

"What?"

"Only the cash'll be outa it before she burns. Adam Grace and Staley are going to see to that. The way she's planned, anyway. But folks think everything burned up with the bank."

"But stuff in the big safe?" the Kid queried.

"It'll be found to have been left open. They's a young teller down there who'll leave the safe unlocked—after apparently closing it—at Adam Grace's orders. The kid thinks he's going to cut himself in on a slice of dinero. Only he'll be grabbed after he leaves the bank tonight, and this town'll never see him again—alive, at least."

The Kid spat out the leaf he had been chewing. "These gents—Grace and Staley—are gambling like crazy now."

"There's a reason. They're scared, Kid. Listen. They're playing for the riches of an empire. *Si,* and empire. Know what's in the Yucca range, in the whole range?"

"What?"

"Black gold! Oil! Oil—all up and down the country. I've knowed it for some time."

THE Kid realized that was one of those things Amigo had not trusted him enough to tell him in the beginning. That was why, Amigo went on, they had driven out other ranchers. They wanted the whole Yucca Strip and its hidden wealth for themselves. Those two alone had known about it, but now their hand was being forced. Word had drifted down from up north in the state that rumors about Yucca oil were being bruited about.

"We spoiled their play that night to jump on the Bar-J of the Jormons, Kid, and the Jormons have just run in some free and fancy special gun-slingers of their own. And there's the Umbrella outfit to the north they had meant to get to."

But it was now too late to work their old game of setting up bogus

excuses for feuds. They would have to buy outright to get possession of those two outfits in time, before the word about the oil really got around. So they would sack the bank and burn it.

"We gotta stop 'em, Kid."

Solo nodded. "But I'm hotter than a cartridge in Hell's own furnace in that town, Amigo."

"Thought of that. Here." He dragged out a paper-wrapped parcel from the cave. He opened it to reveal a blue checkered sunbonnet and a woman's dress of the same material. The Kid started to protest. "Shucks, Kid, you could walk smack under Mike Staley's own nose in this—and get away with it. And—I'll need help."

Solo saw it was so; it would be a perfect masquerade outfit at night. "All right. What are your plans?"

Amigo told him; they were simple. The combined bunches were due to enter the back of the bank about three A. M. They would remove the dinero, then start a raging fire inside. "It's when they're taking the stuff out that we open up and start a gunfight with 'em at the back door. That'll rouse the town and those two will be caught red-handed for once!" He smacked his lips at the thought, grinning.

The Kid shook his head. "Not sure-fire enough. Staley is a smart planner. He'll have trigger slammers stached all over the place. We could even have it hung on us." He walked around a few yards, drawing hard on his quirly. A night bird cried out as it swooped low over the creek water.

Finally Amigo said, a little hurt, "You got a better way."

"What time does the bank close tonight."

"Nine o'clock. Tonight's Saturday. They're greedy—want every last buck they can hook onto. Saturday's big deposit night."

"Uh-huh." The Kid pivoted as he pictured the interior of the bank. In moving about Yucca Bluffs, he had gone inside. It was a pretentious place, the front part two stories high. Then, across the rear of the floor were the teller's cages. Over them was a gallery that gave onto private offices and a meeting room for the bank board.

"If they wasn't to find the dinero when they walked in. . . .now, what about that?"

"Wasn't to find it, Kid?"

"I mean, if we could manage to stay *in* the bank after it was locked up." He talked quickly, in a flat emotionless tone as he outlined the daring scheme.

Amigo's bright lone eye glittered. "It's slick, Kid."

"How's Staley these days?"

"I told you. Now, he drinks 'round the clock. He's cracking fast."

"And if he got there *first* and found the dinero gone . . . ."

"What?"

"Amigo, now's the time to inform Staley about how he was double crossed on the first bank hold-up when you were hired by Grace. Go to him; tell him. And then give him the idee that *he* might work the same game this time, hitting the bank first and leaving Grace out in the cold."

"By grab, Kid!"

"Staley goes in first. . . finds the dinero gone. What's he going to do? Figure Grace crossed him up again, of course. And then Grace and his bunch walks in. . . "

Amigo Jones sucked in his breath in a deep gasp. "Kid, you're one goldarned slick hairpin." And he said it with the honest admiration of an hombre who thought he was right slick himself. And who was. . .

* * *

SUN bonnet low over his face, long blue gingham skirt trailing around his now spurless boots, the Kid tried to imitate a woman's mincing walk as he moved down past the main corners where the bank lights still glowed. His heart skipped as an orey-eyed gent jostled him, but he needn't have worried. A moment later, one of the Reilly brothers, at whose place he had lived, ogled him broadly as he passed. The Kid prayed that nothing flattened the voluminous skirt against the filled holsters be-

neath. He was to meet Amigo up by the hovels around the bluff. Amigo would have word how it had gone with Mike Staley.

The Kid passed the mangy little dance-hall where he had found Mort Royson so many times. And Beesong, the bullet-headed bow-legged gunman of Staley's, was just stepping from the place. Solo figured that at once as Beesong whistled after him. Staley's man, evidently his new lieutenant, had been in to see poor Mort to find out if he had heard from him, his pard, the Kid himself.

Solo noted a side door to the little place and glided down to it, almost tripping on the flowing skirt. He could at least let Mort know he was back. As he opened the door and half stepped in, he saw Mort standing by one of the booths. He was mopping his sweating face. The plump-faced swarthy girl stood nearby. A second later, beyond them, through the open front door, Amigo Jones passed on his way to the rendezvous with Solo.

There was a low cry from the girl as she recoiled, hands thrown up. "Mort! Mort!" She clasped her hands prayerlike before her blanched lips. "That one who just passed! *Ohe, por Dios!* Did you see him? It was the terrible *El Amigo! Por Dios!*"

"El Amigo?" Mort said stupidly, still mopping.

"But yes. I remember him from down in Mexico. *El Amigo!* We must get out of here very quick, Mort. *El Amigo. . .* " Her voice trailed off in fear.

For one moment, the Kid stood locked in his tracks, then he whipped around and was gone from the door—was out on the street and hurrying after Amigo Jones, *El Amigo.* The blood thundered in the Kid's temples. He knew who Amigo Jones was now, and he had the explanation of that note of identification the hunted man in the hotel had handed Mack Royson.

He knew the last living man who could save Mack from hanging.

CHAPTER XVIII

DOWN NEAR the end of the street, where it was dark and almost deserted, he dropped a hand on Amigo's shoulder. The latter spun and grinned triumphantly when he recognized Solo. But his lips stopped halfway as he read something on the Kid's face.

The Kid held out the note that had been handed the doomed Mack. The note with the simple words, "The Friend" and the drawing of a sombrero beneath. "Howdy, *El Amigo.*"

The Kid had heard plenty of the famed *El Amigo,* stories from below the Line. As a younker, he had killed a railroad private detective trying to oust his father's family from their outfit that had been condemned for a right of way. Sentenced to serve a long term, he had escaped and been one of those men branded as "bad" for life. Then he had vanished; after that the story of his career south of the Border had seeped up.

Declared a renegade, he had adopted a conchaed Mex sombrero as his trade-mark and become a sort of Robin Hood. Perhaps because his own life had been ruined by what he considered injustice, he had made it his stern business to help the poor and mete out his personal punishment on the evil-doers. They said he never robbed save to help some poor devil with it, and that he was an avenging archangel himself when it came to tracking down a badman. Down in the land of Manana his name itself had become a legend, enough to strike terror into the heart of a criminal or crook.

Just as the Kid had seen that Maria cry out in terror when she recognized him.

Amigo looked up from the note. "All right. But where did you ever get this, Kid?"

The Kid's face was a dead mask with the somnolent eyes heavier lidded than ever. "When they were hunting you down in the hotel the night of the first bank robbery, you ran into a man's room. You handed him a bundle, some eight thousand

odd dollars, your payoff, I reckon."

"Sure, sure."

"And you gave him this to use to identify whoever came for the dinero when he got back to Hogarth, didn't you?"

"*Si.*"

"That man is the one up in State Prison now, Amigo. The one waiting to be hung, the innocent one. Mack Royson. . . ."

ONE moment Amigo was frowning puzzledly. Then his head jerked up so the black patch slipped away from his dead eye. "*Por Dios!* By grab, that name is right. It *is!* . . . " He clutched at the Kid, swallowing hard. "I swear, I was slammed around bad that night. I forgot the name. When I was wounded, I had the fever. Afterward, I thought the name was 'Mackson.' Honest, Kid. Then I cared no longer because there was Staley. . . . " He nodded. "But Mack Royson—that is right. I recall it now as I see my note, Kid."

There was no doubting his sincerity. It was stamped on his face when the recollection hit him.

"Then you could swear he was here that night—Amigo?"

"I could, Kid."

Side by side, they walked along in silence. Stopped, at last. "The deal with me is still on, Kid?"

"I gave you my word, Amigo."

Amigo, The Friend, wiped sweat from his face with his sleeve. He told about Staley, spirits returning. "His nerve is broke, Kid; he is cracking." He had seen him and given his story about the first double-cross. And Staley the once deadly calm, had raged, had jumped at the idea of working the same trick on Adam Grace this time. He was going to hit the bank and clean it out at two o'clock with some of his other men.

Amigo clutched the Kid's arm in his excitement. "The old Mike Staley wouldn't have done that. He would have been more cautious, smarter. He might even have checked it with Adam. Grace could have called me a danged liar. Staley never even wondered why I came and told him."

"All right," said the Kid, nerves steelier than they had been for days. He had solved the Mack Royson riddle down. Later, there would have to be a showdown with Amigo. "Let's get into that bank."

THEY MOVED around the inside of the Yucca National and Cattlemen's with the Saturday night throng. They looked at the pictures on the walls, a man with a patch on one eye and what seemed to be his wife in tow. A guard with a Colt's sagging on his thigh finally came over and asked them what they wanted. Hat in hand, humble, Amigo said he was waiting to see Mr Grace.

The guard took them over to the desk inside the railing where the chief cashier sat. He was a bony length of man with a profile that would have cut paper and veins streaking his hairless skull. He said Adam Grace wouldn't be back that day.

"He told me to meet him here tonight," Amigo insisted. Out of the corner of his mouth, he croaked to Solo, "Take your foot off that spittoon. Ladies don't stand like that."

The cashier looked Amigo over, then remembered he had seen him in the boss' company. "All right. Wait around. But I don't think he's coming back."

They, Amigo and the Kid, went and gawked at a callendar with a picture of a smoking locomotive on it. "This danged bonnet's hot as blazes. Wish I could take it off," muttered the Kid.

Amigo flashed a glance at the gun guards who stood on the steps outside. "Do that, and you'll have your name on a brand-new cross up on our Boothill."

There was a sort of alcove on one side of the two sets of double doors that extended inward onto the floor space. In the alcove was a big impressive desk with a sign on it that read "President." It was where Adam Grace liked to sit when he came in. Without a word, they eased over that way. A moment later there was some confusion at a teller's window as a liquored-up gambler argued he

had more money in his account. When the strolling inside guard looked around to where the waiting couple had been, they seemed to have left. Behind Grace's big desk, the Kid and Amigo crouched and held their breaths.

Nothing happened. Nobody came.

FINALLY THE last depositor was going out. The hidden pair heard the tellers call good night as they left. After a while, peeping around a corner of the desk, the Kid saw the cashier cross the floor and call good night to the guards on the steps. He and the inside guard closed the solid iron doors inside the regular front doors. A key scraped in a lock and the big bar was dropped into place behind them. They went around pulling down the shades of the high-set long narrow windows. The guard got a stool and clambered up to blow out the two hanging lamps.

"Well, another day done," said the bony cashier with a long sigh as he extinguished the last desk lamp. Their feet clattered on the stone floor as they headed for the back to let themselves out there and lock the door together.

"Scratch that ceiling!" the Kid called with that softness that had more than a hint of iron in it. He came around the desk, sun bonnet shed, guns spiking before him. Around the other side leaped Amigo.

The cashier started for a small derringer he carried in a hip pocket of his blue suit. The gun guard let out a bleating sound and fled for the rear door. It was all over quickly. The Kid, grinning at the cashier's clumsy efforts, closed and beat the little weapon from his shaking hand. Like a hound, Amigo took after the guard. Halfway to the corridor running to the rear door, he was on him and his gun barrel descended. The knocked out guard slid ten feet across the slippery floor when he went down.

In a matter of minutes they had both of them trussed and gagged in the private office off the gallery upstairs. The Kid donned his flat-topped gray sombrero that he had toted under the now discarded dress. And from the chin strings hung the glittering silver skull that helped to give him his nickname. They headed for the big safe set back behind the tellers cages. There was a moment of suspense, but when Amigo turned the latch with one of the ponderous handles, the apparently closed and locked door creaked open. They went to work.

IT WAS tiresome sweaty business as they toted bundles of greenbacks and canvas pouches of currency out of the safe. Then they lugged them up the gallery stairs and tossed them into the private office where the cashier and the guard lay. The former's eyes goggled at them as if they were crazy. Again and again they panted up the stairs, arms loaded with money. Amigo began to laugh and to boot the stuff when he tossed it into the office.

"And to think they was times when I rode the trail without the price of a single drink in my jeans, Kid!"

The chore was finally completed, the last batch of green-backs removed from the mammoth safe. The two of them pushed the doors back closed. Then they went up on the balcony to wait. From the main road came the sound of Yucca Bluffs' Saturday night blowout. It was a perfect night to pull such a job with most of the males in the town well loaded with redeye. A gun snapped out there once.

The two sucked on quirlies, pinched them out and almost at once lighted up fresh ones. It was a long arduous wait with so much hinging on the outcome. It was the Silver Kid's old game of splitting a set of enemies and setting them against each other. And it was a natural play against two such past masters of the double cross as Adam Grace and Mike Staley. There was a gentle snoring sound. Amigo had dropped off with his head against the gallery railing. . . .

SOLO HAD just wondered if time stood still when he heard the

scratching at the rear door. A key working a stubborn lock. The Kid shook Amigo awake. Soundlessly they backed into the board meeting room. Its table of golden oak shone in the soft moonlight that came through the rear second-story barred windows. Keeping the door open a crack, they watched the floor below.

There was the soft slither of boots as a little draft whisked some discarded paper across the floor. The back door had been opened. Vague shapes that were men took form. A spur rattled and there was a curse. The rear door creaked as it was closed. Then a lamp behind one of the cages glowed up.

"All right, boys. Let's get at that safe!" And Mike Staley swayed a little as he stood in the ring of illumination of the lamp. The Kid hardly knew him at first. His gray-white hair was rumpled, his face gullied with pain and his bloodshot eyes sat in pools of deep-etched black rings. His body had become cadaverous, his coat sagging over a collarless shirt. Amigo had known his man all right. Beside him stood bow-legged Beesong.

"Git 'em open," commanded the half-drunken Staley. "We—we'll show that snake of a Grace this time and—" Beesong grabbed his arm to warn him to keep his voice down. There was the grate of a safe door swinging out.

"What-t?" Staley croaked. He ran forward, out of sight from the gallery where the Kid and Amigo waited. "Gimme a lamp! Here—light this other one here. Nobody can see from outside."

The light of a second lamp glowed up. A coughing strangling sort of sound issued from Staley below. Beesong hopped forward. And then Mike Staley came staggering backward into view again, clawing at air as if for support with the shock.

"That damned Grace! He's done it again—double-crossed me!" Staley cried. He began to curse in a fury-thinned voice.

CHAPTER XIX

UPSTAIRS, SOLO STRANT and Amigo touched hands. It had worked.

Below they had to grab hold of Staley and hold him down as he leaped around berserk. He spat out garbled epithets, mouthed inhuman sounds. He ripped at his throat one moment, the next pounded at his head. Then Beesong got a drink between his lips and he recovered some kind of grip on himself. "He was going to come in with our bunch and pretend to be surprised as us too, the coyote," he muttered in the stillness. His men stood around dumbfounded.

Clutching at the bottle, Staley took another long, long slug. He did some more cursing. Then he nodded as he gripped his forehead as if to push back the pain there. "This is the night for the showdown with Adam Grace—only he don't know it yet. This is it."

"They's something right strange about this," said the saner Beesong. "It smells like a dead carcass to me and—"

"Shut down! There'll be the stink of a dead carcass around here—but it'll be Grace's! By Gawd, yes. . . . Listen. To make things look all right, Grace'll come here with those others of ours in tow just like he didn't know anything was wrong. He's got to. You!" He pointed at one of his men. Then he ordered him to go to the Staley gunmen with Grace and pass them the word. They were to let the Grace men enter the bank first and cut down on them from behind when they heard the shooting start.

"What're we going to do?" Beesong asked.

"Set a trap for the dirty coyotes!" Staley bit off savagely as his hands fluttered like gloves on the end of sticks in the wind, far worse than ever. "Rest of us'll wait inside here and let 'em walk in! Then we blow the daylights outa 'em all—including Grace himself! He thought he was going to have oil—" He flung a hand at his mouth.

"But when we're found here ourselves, boss. . . . "

Staley spat on the stone floor. His face was the hue of wet parchment in the lamplight. "We got a tip and caught Grace raiding his own bank —again. Ha-ha-ha. I—" Coughing seized him and he spat red.

BEESONG TRIED to argue but Staley silenced him. Up on the gallery, the Kid wanted to laugh. It was all working out as he had planned, the wolves were going to tear each other apart.

Downstairs the lamps were extinguished. Figures slipped into the deeper shadows. Two went up behind Grace's desk where Solo and Amigo had been. The floor was emptied and the bank seemed deserted again. A man's boots creaked as he climbed to the balcony and hunkered down a few feet from the door where the co-plotters awaited the final payoff.

Again there was the nerve-jangling wait. A match flared over in a corner but Beesong ordered the man to extinguish the cigaret. One thing worried Solo. He didn't know exactly where Staley had gone. And even in his present condition, Mike Staley would be dangerous. He would never forget how the man had grabbed that gun like out of thin air while at his piano. . . .

THE WAIT was much shorter this time. Wheels grated in the yard behind the bank. The revelry from the main street increased as a brawl started and somebody shouted to. "Watch him—he's got a knife!" The back door was opened without the Kid hearing it this time. Amigo's fingers dug into his arm. A spectre-like form in the faint sheen of reflected moonlight was moving past the grille of the tellers cages.

"All right, boys. Get some lamps lit up and let's get down to business." It was Adam Grace speaking, perfectly at ease in the place he bossed. He sauntered about, a gray sombrero clamped on his monkeylike head now, as a pool of yellow light spilled from one lamp. Another lamp came to life. "Light that candle in the tray on that table too," he added. "More light the faster we work."

Up above, as the radiance below increased, the Kid saw the flock of trigger-slammers Grace had with him. He evidently was going to pay off heavily to buy their silence with the aim of making the job a sure thing.

"Staley was probably too danged drunk to show up," he said with a sneer as he passed through the railing gate beside the line of cages. He went toward the safe. "Wait! What's this?"

He had straightened, holding a spur, the heel-clasp type, that he had picked from the floor behind the cages. "Nobody who works here wears spurs." It actually was one Staley himself had kicked loose in his haywire fury.

Grace was out and running across the floor toward the hallway to the rear before anybody realized it. He smelled something amiss. Then the first gun spurted into life from behind a table where depositors filled out their slips. A Bearpaw gunhand buckled forward, grabbing at his back.

But they, the Staley men, had waited a scant few seconds too long, had waited for the others to be stunned, paralyzed, by the shock when they found the empty vault. Bearpaw men had been standing with their hardware already dragged. Even as the walls thundered with the report, they were swinging, cocking hammers. The battle exploded like the bottom dropping out of Hell. Two Bearpaw men, hit, dropped. But a Staley trigger man plunged out from back of a post, half his face shot away.

And the alert Grace himself stood and slammed lead down that narrow hallway to the rear door, cutting loose even as the Staley men in the wake started to obey orders. Screams sliced through the savage biting crackle of loosed lead.

"Git that back door closed!" Grace bawled to one of his own men down there. "Close it!" And the thudding slam of it came through the din.

UP ON the balcony, at the first whipcrack of a gun, Amigo had reached out the door and bent his gun barrel over the head of the Staley man up there. The two of them crept out onto the gallery, crouched. A wild slug clipped a piece from the Kid's hat brim. Below, it was almost like a slaughtering pen as wild-eyed killers hosed their lead in the comparatively confined quarters.

Some Bearpaw men had ducked around inside the cages and were firing over them. A Staley man howled with agony as a lamp near him was shattered and the burning oil spattered over him. He flung himself to the floor and rolled to extinguish the flames in his clothing. There was the spit of weapons, but only lightly, from the yard in the rear.

This thing couldn't last long. For a matter of moments the firing fell off as men hastily reloaded. The Kid couldn't spot the raging Staley himself. Another lamp went. But one and the candle continued to burn, miraculously unharmed in the hailstorm of crisscrossing lead.

The next instant, Amigo toppled over against the bent kid, clutching at his shoulder. He was hit, strangely. Then spangled figures exploded before the Kid's eyes and he felt the floor coming up to meet him. He had been struck a glancing blow over the ear by a gun barrel swung from behind. And through fogged eyes he saw a Staley man leap out onto the gallery from the board room. The man screamed:

"Stop it! Stop it! Here're the two snakes who got in and robbed the bank first!"

Then the Kid fired with his right gun twice as he steadied his senses while he lay prone. The man went sliding sidewards on rubbery legs down the gallery, a bullet in his head. The Kid was up, swaying, but determined. He swung to the open door of the board meeting room. Inside, in the moonlight, he saw Mike Staley and another man just emerging from a rear staircase that led into the other end of that room. Staley had planned to deal the finishing blow from behind and upstairs.

Life and death counterbalanced for a split second then. The lightning like Kid drilled his first shot into Staley's gun arm. As the other's hogleg flew from his grip, Staley dropped behind the end of the table. The man with him fired, his report blending with the Kid's second. The man missed. A man didn't make that mistake twice against the Kid. The latter's next bullet got him dead center in the chest and he caromed off the wall and slid down.

STALEY'S white nervous hands, like something r i s i n g from water, appeared over the table end. The Kid swayed with nausea from the effect of that glancing skull blow. It had reopened his head gash. "Surrender, Staley?" he called, always wishing to take a man alive and let the Law deal with him when he could.

Staley's shrunken face appeared, going up and down in assent. Then, like something plucked out of thin air, his other hand jumped up with a hogleg spiking from it. The Kid's guns had started to lower. A red eye bloomed from Staley's muzzle, but the Kid's twin weapons had already winked with bloody-hued powder flame. Staley was pinned back into the chair at the head of the board table like a little old doll. As the Kid turned back to the gallery, he knew Staley was a dying man. Those twin shots had taken him in the belly.

At the head of the stairs, on his knees, Amigo Jones triggered at some men trying to rush up. His weapon clicked empty as he sent one pitching across the stair railing. The Kid leaped forward. A bullet fanned his cheek, and then he sent a slug into the right shoulder of Adam Grace who had almost drilled him. Going to his knees, Grace started to slide backward down the stairs, bumping from tread to tread curiously. All the nerve ran out of him. He stretched up his good arm pleadingly as if to beg the Kid to desist.

There was one last shot on the floor below. Men had already fled out the back door, belly-sickened at the carnage. Amigo hauled himself

up, forcing a grin as he clutched his shoulder.

"Busy time while it last, eh, Kid? We—"

"I surrender!" bleated a man back in the rear hallway. There was the thud of purposeful determined boots. And Warren, deputy marshal, with a handful of his special deputies, marched in.

"I *knew* you was a bank robber!" he cried as he recognized the Kid despite the blood from the scalp wound smeared on his face.

OUTSIDE the worried curious mob shuffled and murmured. Inside the bank with its blood-stained floor, the Kid and Amigo had already told their versions of it. Staley had been carried down and laid out on a table with but a feeble flicker of life left in him. But monkeylike Adam Grace, his mere flesh scratch in the shoulder bandaged after Amigo had been patched up, sat in a chair completely at ease and smoking.

"Don't give a hang what these two say," he stated, nodding at the Kid and his pard. "My story is that I had been tipped off there was going to be an attempt on the bank tonight. I came here with some men to try to catch them red-handed. See? Earlier in the night I had already emptied the safe and put the money up in that private office and—"

"Ask your cashier and guard about that," the weary Kid drawled.

"They were in cahoots with you doubtless," Grace said casually. "I'm known in this town. Who're you two? Just a couple of gun-passers. Why I know that Strant there was hired by Staley! The other one—he tried to blackmail me! Take it into court and see whose charges stand up, by grab!"

Warren eyed the Kid worriedly. After all, Adam Grace was a power in this community. Warren had a couple of overdue notes the bank was holding. "By your own admission, you practically broke in and—"

"Who will the court believe?" Grace said with negligent impatience as if it were all a foregone conclusion. "After all, I'm Adam Grace and—"

Staley's pain-wracked face lifted from the table. "Like hell you are," he croaked out of bloodless lips. "Didn't know I knew—that I always had it w-waiting to hold over you, eh?" He gagged, then steadied himself for a final attempt. "You aren't Adam Grace, Foster Grace's brother. You killed Adam Grace down in Twin Notch and took his papers. You're Pat Whiting, an ex-card sharp and—and y-you did twelve years in Tucson once for another killing. Th-that c-can be proven by—by the re-cords there and—" He fell back, fighting for air, his fluttering hands slowly stiffening.

The Kid's eyes flickered to Susan Grace standing with a group in that hallway to the rear. He didn't see the man who called himself Adam Grace, Whiting, stem his hand against his side and bend over as if in pain. There was a muffled explosion. And Whiting plunged very slowly out of the chair. He had killed himself neatly, without removing his derringer from the pocket of his flowered vest, piercing his heart with the slug. . . .

CHAPTER XX

THE ATMOSPHERE of Yucca Bluffs was like a living, pulsing thing that ballooned in and out as the fever of excitement refused to abate. Lights were on in every house. Curious throngs still milled around the bank and stared at the still figures laid out in the rear of it. In the big bars and gambling hells, men bawled for drinks and discussed the bank battle. The Kid and Amigo knew all about it; they wanted peace and quiet. That was why they were in the little hole of a now deserted dance-hall with Mort Royson and his girl. Nobody was dancing any more that night.

The Kid dumped down his peg of redeye and stood up. Knowing what was coming, Amigo rose, easing his bandaged shoulder around. Solo tried to smile some.

"Hate to call a wounded man, Amigo," he said hurriedly to get the painful job done. "But I guess you know why I got to take you back to Hogarth?"

Mort's eyes popped. "This man, he saw Mack here that time?" he cried shrilly, guessing it at once.

Amigo nodded calmly, both he and the Kid realizing what it meant when the Law got their clutches on the famed *El Amigo* again. "Like to ask one thing, though," Amigo said, studying Mort. "That jasper who came into the cave and hit you and killed Sudden—was he right or left handed?"

Mort looked puzzled. "Why—uh—right-handed, of course," he said hurriedly. It was logical. Most men were right-handed.

Amigo waved a finger at the bruises of that gun barrel blow that still showed on Mort's forehead. "Right-handed, you say. And he jumped you so quick you couldn't do anything. There was no struggle, you said."

"Sure, I—that's right." He flung a glance at the girl who stood a little behind them, fearful of Amigo. "Yes."

"Then how in blazes," drawled Amigo boredly, "could you get them bruises on the *right* side of your head? A right-handed man lashing out would uh hit you on the left side coming straight at you like that."

SOMETHING flashed through the Kid's brain. It didn't seem possible that it was so but it was the simplest, most logical explanation. Then the keyed-up girl, losing control, screamed thinly.

"You shot Sudden Ryerson yourself, Mort!" the Kid had it. "Then you slapped yourself over the head and told that story. But why—"

The girl had half bent as if to fix a garter on her black stocking. The next instant, still screaming, she was behind Amigo with a double-barrelled derringer in her hand. The cat-quick Kid jabbed out his hand and shoved Amigo sideward. The vicious little bullet whipped where he had been. Then the Kid had the girl slung around in his arms and twisted the small gun from her hot hand.

"Juanita!" cried Mort as he grabbed for his holster.

The Kid flung her away and a hogleg whipped up in his hand. Mort let go of his almost drawn Colts and it bounced twice on the floor.

"Juanita," the Kid repeated softly. "Mack's girl back at Hogarth. And she's here—with you, following you . . . .Well-l." Then he fitted the pieces together with whiplike swiftness, thinking aloud. "Yes, you killed Sudden because you didn't want your cousin, Mack, cleared. And it was you who told Warren down

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the line in that settlement that I was Ralph Devons the gunman and mixed up in the robbery here—because you didn't want me to find the man who could get your cousin free," he followed it backward.

Quivering, loose-lipped, Mort stood clinging to the end of a booth. The Kid traced on back implacably.

"And then it must have been you who killed the wounded Lyons back in Horseshoe Bend—and said I did it when I was dazed—because he could have cleared Mack too. Yes."

Amigo spoke. "There's the snake who told Staley you kidnapped Sudden, Kid. After all, he knew how you'd done it. And Staley might have silenced you *once* and for all."

The Kid nodded. "And why you did this—"

"I—there's no proof," mumbled Mort Royson. "No—"

The quick-eyed Kid saw Juanita edging toward the side door. "Stop or I'll fire," he cried. But he knew he couldn't throw down on a woman.

She flung herself at the blackness beyond the half-open door. Then brought up short. "You wouldn't, Solo, but I would!" And Susan Grace stepped in.

"Thanks," the Kid clipped. "Juanita, you go back too, you know, to stand trial as an accomplice!"

Her plump face paled. Then she tongued her lips and that tongue went to work. She was a smart one. "I'll turn State's evidence. They can't do anything to me. Yes, he was always around me when Mack went away. And I told him if he'd get some real dinero—" She tossed her head. "Well, he killed Lucas the gambler that night. Not Mack, of course. We—we were scared when it came out some men had seen him. But they took him for Mack, of course. We thought we were safe. But then Chan Murphy took the trail. And then you had to come along and—"

MORT extended his right hand, with the Kid's bullet brand, toward her beseechingly. He sagged down into a booth, that hand still in view. It was his left that snaked out the .32 hidden in his boot under the

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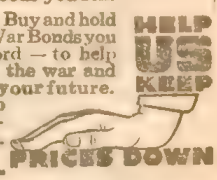

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table. But he had to bring the gun hand out from under it to get in his shot. And at such close range the deadly Kid could not miss his target.

The snaky Mort's gun flew from his fingers as he was about to trigger. And across the fingers of that left hand was a red-running welt, another of the Kid's bullet brands. Solo laughed coldly, just then realizing he had been fingering the skull back again at his throat all the time.

"And I felt sorry for you because I thought I'd put my brand on an innocent harmless man," he said. "But the brand never lies. A man with it always dies, and you'll stretch rope, Mort."

"I got another pair of handcuffs," Amigo said. "But a man should put them on himself before he goes crazy enough to try to shoot it out with you. . . ."

* * * *

Warren, looking for the Kid, had stepped in half a minute afterward. He had taken Mort Royson down to the jailhouse for safe-keeping until they hit the return trail in the morning, taken Juanita as well.

Now, Susan Grace stood talking to the two trigger-slamming partners. The Kid said it sheepishly.

"Amigo, I'm glad you don't have to go back with me. . . .And I always ride alone, Solo. But if I was to have a trail pard, I'd want it to be you."

Amigo flashed that quick gentle smile around the black eye patch. "Ho-ho, Kid, you must uh got hit on the head bad tonight."

Susan spoke; her hand had dropped apparently by accident on the Kid's arm. It was plain what was in her adulating eyes as she gazed into the Kid's face. The Kid saw Amigo. He was looking at the girl with the same look she had. Then Amigo turned away; Solo understood. Amigo knew that he, as an outlaw, could never take such a girl in wedlock. He was the kind who wouldn't do that to a woman.

"Could two men find a nice cup of strong coffee for a very tired girl?" Susan said to the Kid.

The Kid nodded, then switched his eyes to Amigo. "Hey, Amigo, ever know a woman when she didn't want anything? I'll toss you a coin to see who buys the java and a coupla drinks!" There never could be another woman for the Kid in his life. There had been one once, one Marietta.

Amigo said gruffly, "I'll bet you got a crooked coin!"

Solo chuckled. "I'll swap mine for yours, fella. . . ."

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of Double-Action Western published bi-monthly at Holyoke, Mass. for October 1, 1944.

State of New York }
County of New York } ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Louis H. Silberkleit, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the publisher of Double-Action Western and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

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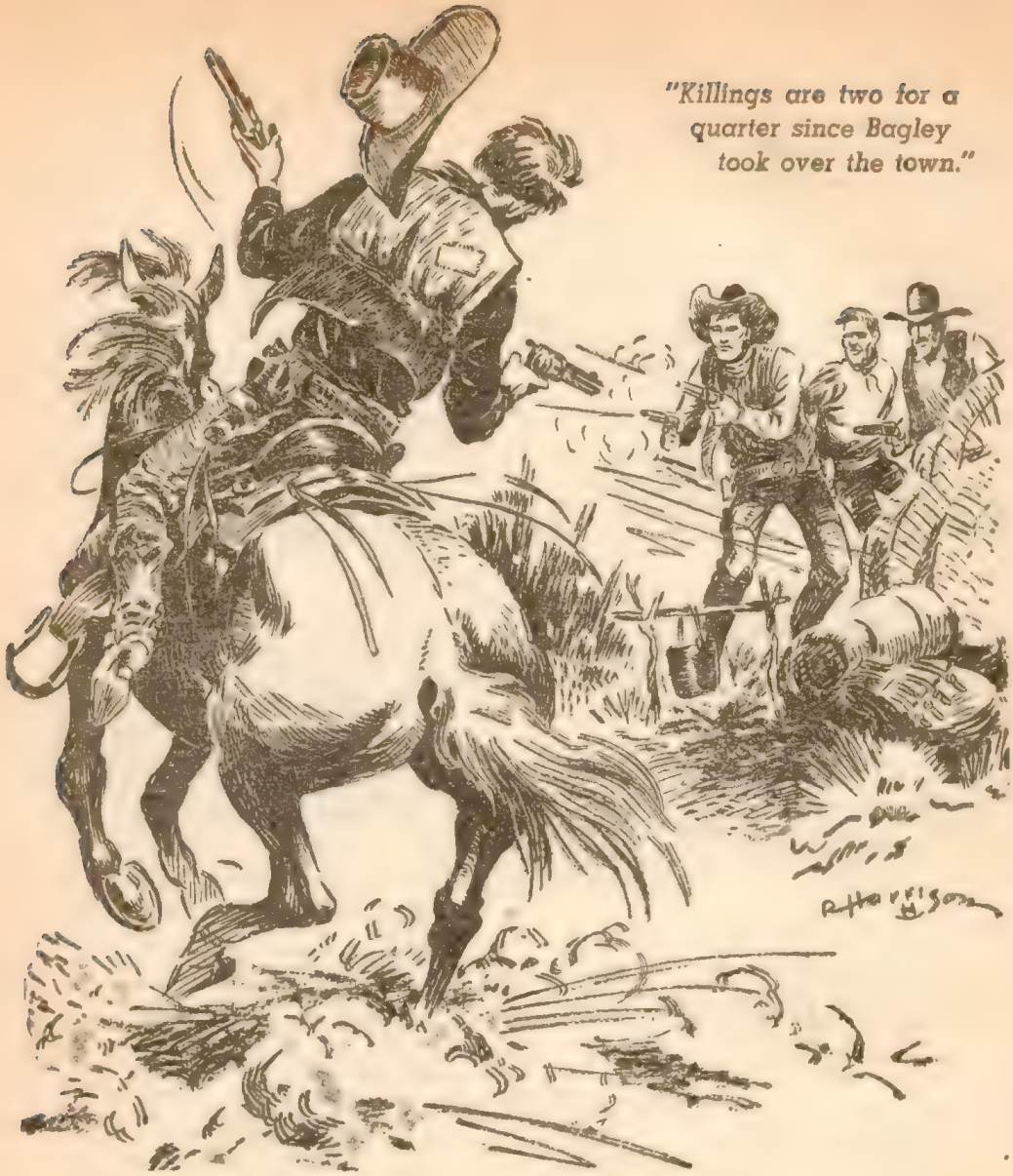
LOUIS H. SILBERKLEIT
(Signature of Publisher)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 29th day of September, 1944. Maurice Coyne. (My commission expires March 30, 1946.) [SEAL]



"Killings are two for a quarter since Bagley took over the town."

SIX POINTS OF THE LAW

By E. C. Shaw

When badge-packers can't halt lawlessness, it's time to appeal to lead-throwers!

THE SHERIFF took custody of the body of nester Miles Garner, whom Ned Bagley had just smoked down, and lugged it out-

side the Long Rail, Carson City's biggest saloon.

The little stranger sitting to the left of Bud Sturdy at the poker table silently laid down his cards, and spat a rich brown stream into the nearest cuspidor.

"What's the talley now?" he asked of no one in particular.

Of the party of six men playing poker, only Andy Stevens answered. "Two," he said briefly.

The little man picked up his cards again. "This month?" he inquired casually.

"This week."

"A mite lawless town you gents got here," remarked the stranger. "Two killin's in a week is kinda raw. 'Smatter? Sheriff got rust on his tin badge?"

The circle of nesters and small land holders looked uneasily at each other. Explaining the terror that gripped Carson City was not easy, especially to this frock-coated, crisp little man. The stranger's eyes followed Stevens' as the ranch hand glanced through the big windows at the form of Ned Bagley, standing in front of the Sheriff's office, posting a large sheet of paper on the bulletin board.

"I've only been in town a few days," he said, "but it didn't take me ten minutes to find out who runs the place."

"It's Bagley's town," remarked Sturdy, quietly. "We figger that by keepin' out of his way we'll stay healthy. You look like a cautious man yourself, Mr. Wellers. After all, we owe it to our families. The kids and wimmen folk gotta eat. Miles Garner's kids won't from now on. Any of us fed his kith or kin, we'd be burnt out."

Wellers, a traveling judge who had spent a short time in Carson City disposing of minor legal cases, built a quirley expertly with one hand, put it to his withered lips and inhaled deeply. He was tired; he had occupied his time well assaying a couple of tons of fool's gold, put the hand of justice on small-time feuds, stamped a few ounces of real dust with the state insignia and then withdrawn to the serenity of the Long Rail to heave a few cards with boys and wet his whistle. Exhaling a stream of smoke from his thin nostrils, he pulled a .45 from one of his holsters and laid it on the table. Four deep-cut notches indented the cedar butt.

"Never did put much trust in star toters,' 'he said. "Always had a heap more in lead throwers. Now I'll allow that the Sheriff's been out of town for a few days, but he was here when Bagley got his irons free of leather. Garner's dead and the tin badge don't make no arrest."

THE others looked at him helplessly; Bagley always had witnesses to swear a victim had drawn on him. The air hung silent and heavy. Then, suddenly, the big front door of the saloon swung backwith a double-crash and the Sheriff stalked in, his hands stuck stiffly in his belt. A row of heads craned up sharply.

"Well, Bagley's done it now," he announced to the room, but kept his eyes on Wellers." He pointed out through the windows toward his office where but a few moments previously the town boss had finished scrawling up a public notice. "Guess you're in for it, Kelsam," he continued, glancing at one of the players at the table. "Musta got his goat, like Garner. Bagley's just posted a notice orderin' you to high tail it out of his spread by tomorrer noon!"

Kelsam leaned back in his chair, white and helpless. He looked as though every man in town had accused him of card cheating and brand-skipping.

At first, the nesters didn't know what to say. They sat back with a look on their faces as though judgment day had struck. For Kelsam to quit the small section of land claimed by Bagley was tantamount to suicide. Getting out of the spreads surrounding Carson City meant a hard march across the Stony Range to farm and pasture land two hundred miles south. He'd never make it. The nester and his family were bound to give out on the trail.

Wellers clicked the firing pin of his .45. "Well," he demanded, "what are you hombres goin' to do about it? Today it's Kelsam. . . " His glance travelled the circle of faces. "Tomorrer, or the day after tomorrer it might be any one of you. If you give in on Kelsam, you're a bunch of locoheads."

Bud Sturdy looked up at him sharply. "Got any ideas, Judge? We're cold as horned toads."

Wellers slowly replaced his shooting iron. He finished his cigarette before replying, his eyes, meanwhile looking inward in deep reflection. Fnally he glanced at Kelsam. "Your spread's the one down near the south border of what Bagley claims is his land, ain't it?"

Kelsam nodded.

Wellers smiled. "Judged it was," he said, "I was lookin' over the environs map just yestiddy when I settled Midge Harum's case—and I just remembered somethin'. It's obvious we can't get Bagley on a murder charge, with killin' two fer a quarter, but. . . "

BY THE time the Judge had finished talking, the nesters were practically dancing round in circles. Wellers held up a hand. "We'll need about twenty sticks of dynamite," he warned.

Sheriff Cady's broad face split in a smile. "Got a heap of the stuff back of the jail."

Rounding up enough men to carry out Weller's plan proved no great difficulty. By nightfall, a group of about thirty nesters and small land holders had gathered at the Kelsam house; after copious refreshments, they moved northward along the spread boundary for several miles until they reined in at a spot previously marked by Wellers. The buckboards that followed, carrying dynamite, were quickly unloaded. A guard was thrown about the patch of gulch land and the work began, presided over by Wellers who sat on a high ledge of rock, smoking quirley after quirley, directing operations until the sun began jutting up over the horizon and some of the nesters' women folk who had come over the trail started making breakfast.

The sweating men ate in relays. When daylight was full, the work was completed and the whole party got under way for the Kelsam household, leaving two men behind to watch the laboriously dug constructions.

BAGLEY'S word was good when it meant a few more pounds of lard on his own carcass. The ranch boss showed up just before noon with about ten of his gunmen. They came riding the Warren-Carson City road, trampled down the small cottonwood fence surrounding Kelsam's diggins and rode up, thundering, to the homestead. The nester's friends, carefully hiding themselves behind the house up to this point, walked out into the open, as Bagley drew rein.

The old range pirate got as purple as a squash. He shed saddle quickly, and, sided by his men, came busting up to meet the angry nesters.

"Think you're goin' to stop me, eh, Kelsam," he yelled. Then he halted abruptly, drew from leather and fired. One of the panes in a front window of the house caved in with a tinkling crash.

Kelsam, his face cold and drawn, sided by one of his friends, walked up. "Mebbe so, mebbe not," he barked. "Ain't high noon yet, Bagley."

The range boss got as mad as a hornet, stepped back a few paces and snapped an order. The rest of his gang dove for leather. None of the others moved. Then, gathering his courage, Bagley cried, "Alright, boys, grab their irons!" and started moving in.

The Kelsam spread was about two miles from town. Just as the clock in the town hall tower began its noon-hour chime a strange vibration shook the ground violently, followed by a terrible roar that sounded like a tornado in head-on collision with a twister. The cascade of noise rumbled on, reaching a shattering cresendo just as Bagley dropped his irons with a start and clapped both

hands over his outraged ears. The ground continued to shake like a cottonwood in a high wind for a moment more, than quieted down.

Kelsam, bending over, picked up Bagley's guns and handed them back. "You won't need these, I reckon," he said, and pointed to a deep gulley that ran north and south about fifty yards from the house. Standing alongside the rim was Wellers, his dry lips curled in a triumphal grin.

Bagley looked once, then his eyes almost popped out as he saw Miner's Creek, which formed the north boundary of Kelsam's spread and which had been blasted from its path by many sticks of dynamite, come roaring down the gulley. The creek had a head on it like a glass of beer and heaved and moaned like a thing alive.

KELSAM tapped Bagley on the shoulder. "You're trespassin', Ned."

The range boss looked at the nester with jumpy, frightened eyes. "What d'ye mean, trespassin'?" he screamed, "This is *my* land!"

Kelsam pointed toward the gulley, already eight feet deep in water. "Git goin'," he said, quietly. "This land is mine now, Bagley. Legal and proper. Wellers here told us about a law in this state which says that a man can't own land on both sides of a stream, the law bein' intended to protect cattle grazers from havin' a creek dammed and their grazin' land dried up. You made a mistake, Bagley, locatin' your ranch buildings at one corner of what you thought was your spread, because this new creek cuts off the whole corner from our holdin's. Guess you'll have enough left to raise a few blades of wheat on, though."

As he talked, Kelsam's friends, led by Wellers had been edging into a semi-circle around Bagley and his gunmen. Suddenly the little circuit judge threw lead at the sky and jumped like a tadpole in front of the range boss.

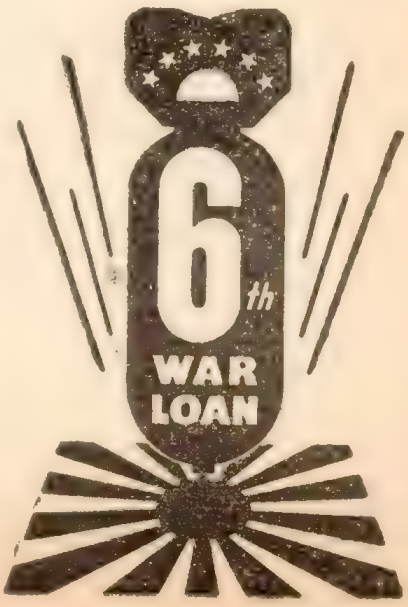
"Come on, Bagley," he cried pointing toward the creek with the muzzles of his guns. "Get goin'—and when you reach the edge, jump! You were always a great one fer talkin' about possession, they tell me. Well, possession is nine points of the law —and I've got six of 'em here." He tapped one gun butt with the other.

Bagley snarled. He was about to give the signal to fight back, when his bluster went out of him like the wind out of a balloon and he caved in all at once. He and his ten gunmen sidled up to the creek's bank, herded by the nesters, tested the water gingerly and finally took the leap. The creek was about a dozen feet wide and all of them missed their footing. They emerged on the other side a couple of hundred feet downstream, cursing, and hopping like toads up the far bank.

Kelsam sided his guns. He walked up to Wellers who was holding his sides with laughter. "Reckon they won't be back, Judge; their powder's wet." He said. Then he looked quisically down at the little man. "Lissen' here, Judge, you done us all a favor. Now what can we do fer you?"

Wellers had his pocket knife out, cutting another notch in the butt of his left-side gun. "You can buy me a glass of beer," he said finally, "I'm as dry as a cactus growin' out of a rock."

(THE END)



SPOOK RANGE

By Joe Austell Small

(Author of "Bulls Don't Wear Drawers," "Stingy Men Are Spendthrifts," etc.)

It Was a Sad Day When This Waddy Let the Boss' Favorite Horse, Panther Grease, Slip Away!

I'M NOT a gent that usually gets in a lather about restless spirits of the dead, but I've got savvy enough to shift my stomping grounds when the haints start running in packs.

It's while I'm wrangling cavvy for old Jim Dawson of the Oak Leaf spread that the ghosts get my trail scent and bay loud on an all night run!

Now even though I'm still pretty much of a young'un, I have a real man's job and I'm proud of it. I can see myself doing rope work and drawing down top wages inside six months. Then I'll sport myself a saddle rig and be ready to walk up and spit in the world's eye.

But I don't think about that wild paint hoss running off like he does.

"Panther Grease" old Jim calls that glassy-eyed paint, and a more lively hoss I've got to bare eyeballs to yet. He's old Jim's pet cutting hoss, a bay with one stocking leg and freckled jaw. There's a ragged white splotch the size of a saddle blanket hanging from his withers and laying back against his right side. To me, the animal looks and acts more like a bad dream than a hoss, but old Jim thinks the sun rises and sets in that animal.

"Why shucks, boys!" old Jim would often say. "I can take the bridle off that hoss and cut a tick out of a cow's flank without turning a hair! A thousand wouldn't buy that hoss!"

"Yeah, and I'm one of the thousand!" old Grapevine Johnson had spoken up once.

My job's keeping the remuda and I'd been all right at it if the boys hadn't picked my little grassy basin one day to work cattle in. I like to watch them rope the critters, and maybe I didn't keep an eye close enough on this Panther Grease hoss. He's a bunch-quitter and a trouble-raiser and I ought never to have strayed away for a minute. The sun's done making my shadow long on the green prairie grass when I miss him.

I'm sure sick when I ride up to where they're holding the gather beside a rain-filled buffalo wallow. This is the first slip-up I've made since I signed on. But it's a case of owning up now or getting raked over the coals later on.

THE herd's bawling and milling and dust stands high in the air. I sight Mighty-Tired Mietzen hanging like a rag in his saddle. He tells me that old Jim has rode over to town on business. I own up what I've done then.

"Thunderation!" Mighty-Tired exclaims. "You might as well have backshot the boss! We'll start cutting this herd tomorrow, and if the boss don't have his cutting hoss by daylight he's liable to tear you up like a wild sow's bed. Old Jim's easy-going, but he don't stand for no foolishment when it comes to that hoss!"

"Whatta you reckon I better do?" I asks, a frog crawling up into my throat.

"Tell you what," Mighty-Tired speaks solemn. "That hoss'll make for Grandma Dawson's house. Jim raised him up there 'afore he bought this little spread. Now if you was to light a shuck for Paint Rock right now, chances are you could make it back with that old rambler by daylight. I'll keep an eye on the cavvy. With luck, old Jim won't never know

you let him get away. But I'd sure hate to be in your boots at sun-up without him!"

Now I haven't been in the cow business at this time long enough to know how much satisfaction a cowhand gets out of rawhiding a kid. So I jerk up my cinch a little tighter and head for Paint Rock. It's a long ride.

Now this particular evening's a weather breeder. Thunder heads have been boiling up out of the northwest all day and milling like thirsty cattle. Now they're bunching and forming a solid rain bank. She's a black one and is moving down fast, rumbling and threatening. The sun's too hot for the time of day. The light's too yellow. The air's changed with something that quickens a man's heart beats and makes him uneasy. It's the sort of weather that puts snakes and tarantulas on the crawl and makes the prairie wolf howl lonesome from the high ridges.

In no time the sun's shut out. The light changes from yellow to green. Things just don't look real. The bunch grass bows down under a head wind that moans across the prairie. Riding straight into a storm like this makes me shiver like a dog in the wet. I sure wish there was some place to take cover in and I had time to stop. I'm all set for a wetting that'll mold the rags on my back. This rain'll be a trash-floater and a gully-washer. I'm lonesome enough to howl with the wolves.

Ragged lightning's streaking from one horizon to the other. When a bolt rips into a green live oak to the right of me and leaves a scattered pile of stove wood in its place, maybe I do howl a little.

It's about this time I sight a shack up ahead. The storm's standing up on her hind legs and whooping now. I figure to hole up in this shack while it blows over.

THE shack is vacant. It's got one long room and a front gallery with the roof sagging. One glance through the half-open door, and I know she's too spooky inside for Slim Saunders. I back up against the wall and squat down where I can watch the rain. The drops are big. Until they get the dust nailed down, them big drops kick up the prairie dust like throwed rocks.

When the hair starts to crawl at the back of my neck, I know there's eyes watching me. My stomach flounces like a fish out of water. My blood turns to ice and it seems like it's five minutes before I can look around.

When I do, there's a ghost standing there in the door. It's a female ghost in a white wrap. Her hair's white. It's stringy as the frazzled end of a rope. That ghost's grinning at me, showing the one tooth in her head.

But there's no grin in her eyes. They're green with yellow lights in them. And they're blazing like the eyes of a cornered wolf in a stand-off fight.

Me—I'm paralyzed. I can't think. All I can do is set there and whimper like a lost pup while my toes curl backwards in my boots. And then she raises a pale finger and speaks: "And I looked, and beheld a pale hoss; and his name that set on him was Death, and Satan followeth thereafter!"

For going on three months after that I tried to figure out how I managed to grab up my saddle, untie that dun hoss and land in the middle of his back all in one jump. In a matter of seconds I'm bogging spurs to him and lifting him across the low places.

I do all right until my hoss makes a sudden turn around the end of a gully and I keep going on straight ahead. I light finally in the bottom of the draw, using my ear for a landing block. And when I try to get up, I find an arm run through one saddle stirrup up to the shoulder and a boot shoved through the other one up to my knee. I'm down on my all-fours. The rain's rattling on my back and my teeth's rattling in my head. Altogether, she's a lonesome proposition.

WHILE I'm unbuckling a spur to free my foot from the stir-

rup, I hear a shout up the trail my hoss is headed and on the second try I manage to raise a holler. In a couple of minutes up rides a gent wearing a yellow slicker and leading my hoss.

He's a neighboring rancher and claims he's hunting his ma. Says the pore old woman loses her mind every now and then and runs off down to that old abandoned church house where his pa used to preach the gospel. He invites me to help him bring her back.

Me—I'm plumb certain he'll find her there, which is the reason I decline. I don't add that he hasn't got a hoss and a catch rope strong enough to drag me back to that church house, even with the ground slick as it's getting.

Lightning rips the sky wide open as I take the trail again. Thunder loosens the flood gates and the rain spills out like a wash woman emptying her tubs. She's a gully-humper. In a couple of minutes a sluice of water the size of a well-rope is following the crease of my backbone. My boots are running over at the tops.

Dark comes slipping along on ghostly legs. She's blacker'n the inside of a grave at midnight. A man can't find his face with both hands. Streaks of lightning flare regular, but the rain's too thick to see through. If my hoss don't know the way to Paint Rock, the country's gonna lose a mighty good hoss wrangler. The ground shakes with the thunder.

I ride miserable and keep remembering the words that she-ghost says to me—"And I looked, and beheld a pale hoss; and his name that set on him was Death, and Satan followeth thereafter!"

Wal, I'm riding a pale hoss and I'm willing to admit that Satan's riding close on my tracks all right! But that death business is what gives me the creeps. Does she mean I'm Death or that I'm fixing to die? I sure am a right sorrowful cowhand on this ride.

IT'S WHEN the rain slacks off and I can begin to make out the dim features of shadowy trees and boulders that the second ghost starts riding the lone trail with me. He's riding right beside me, off about thirty steps, when I first sight him. I can't see the hoss he's riding, but I can hear the mud sucking at the critter's feet.

Now if you think that white garment floating along beside me in the dark ain't a scary sight, try to holler sometime when you're paralyzed. I try now, but nothing comes out. I can already feel old Death's cold fingers reaching for my neck. Then I fade away so fast the air smells scorched.

But that haint follows me. I can't outrun him. So I pull up to let him pass and he slows with me. For the first time that night I remember the old .44 peacemaker at my right hip and I busts loose at that ghost with all I've got. He fades away. I either down him or throw a scare into him that changes his direction of travel. The only thing that keeps me company from there to Grandma Dawson's hoss lots is my imagination. But that's a-plenty!

I circle the place a time or two and search out all the corrals. I'm hoping I can locate old Panther Grease and leave out without rousing the house. But the hoss is not in sight.

Now the ranch corrals are set off to themselves apiece. There's a long lane leading from them to the house. This lane is bordered on both sides with thick rows of salt cedar. I leave my dun in the corral and head for the house afoot. Maybe Grandma'll help me out and not tell old Jim.

Now I haven't gone ten steps up this lane before I'm recollecting a yarn Grandma's colored helpers tell. They claim that one night a gent by the name of Bowers was walking up this lane when his worst enemy slips a knife in his flank and walks around him, leaving nothing to hold him up but his backbone. Bowers screams himself to death right here in this lane, and on dark, stormy nights his spirit comes back to ha'nt the place where he was kilt. The darkies claim they've seen Bowers' head resting on

a fence post at midnight and fire streaming out his ears.

I know how colored folks can tell a yarn and on any ordinary night I wouldn't give it a second thought. But tonight things is different. The two ghosts I've done seen has made me jumpy as a cat on ice. I hit a trot.

Maybe I don't see Bowers' ghost because it's laying in wait for me on the ground, instead of on top a fence post. The first I know is when it raises between my legs with a snort and heads for the house in a buck-jumping run, with me a-straddle of its back.

I SQUALL once and die for the third time this night. Then fright takes a strangle holt on me. I try to jump clear of this spook, but my muscles won't work. I'm a goner and I know it. Death's finally caught up with me and old Satan's following close behind!

It's the yard dogs what save me from this death ride. They hear my squall and come out from under the door steps, baying savage. Bowers' ghost stops sudden. I keep going. I hit the ground running. These are biting dogs Grandma keeps, but I run right over them and straight through a window. I'm brought up sharp against the far wall with a window sash ringing my neck and broke glass falling all around me. I'm squalling at the top of my voice and the dogs come yelping through the window after me. They tie into me like I'm a chicken-thieving coon.

Then Grandma comes running in with a lantern in one hand and a bed slat in the other. She fights them off and exclaims:

"Good gracious, Slim—what happened?"

I tell her I've just rode old Bowers' ghost. The little lady says I'm crazier'n a cockroach in a hot skillet and drags me down the lane. The lantern light shows my tracks leading right astraddle of a dry spot where a cow's been laying up.

Still my skin is as bumpy as a shriveled-up lemon. I tell her about the white ghost that rides beside me down the trail. She says that must have been old Ironjaw, an outlaw white hoss the whole country's been trying to eliminate.

After a good warm breakfast next morning and some dry clothes, I do feel better, but somehow I've just taken a sort of dislike to this country all of a sudden. I thank Grandma warmly for all she's done and asks her to spread the word of my crave for travel to old Jim. She nods understanding like and I hit saddle leather again.

Somehow, I never have been sorry about throwing the fight to the spooks and shifting my range. I'm happier these days!

THE END

A THRILL PACKED, COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

GUNSLICK FROM CERRO

By Joseph Reardon

IT'S IN THE WINTER ISSUE OF

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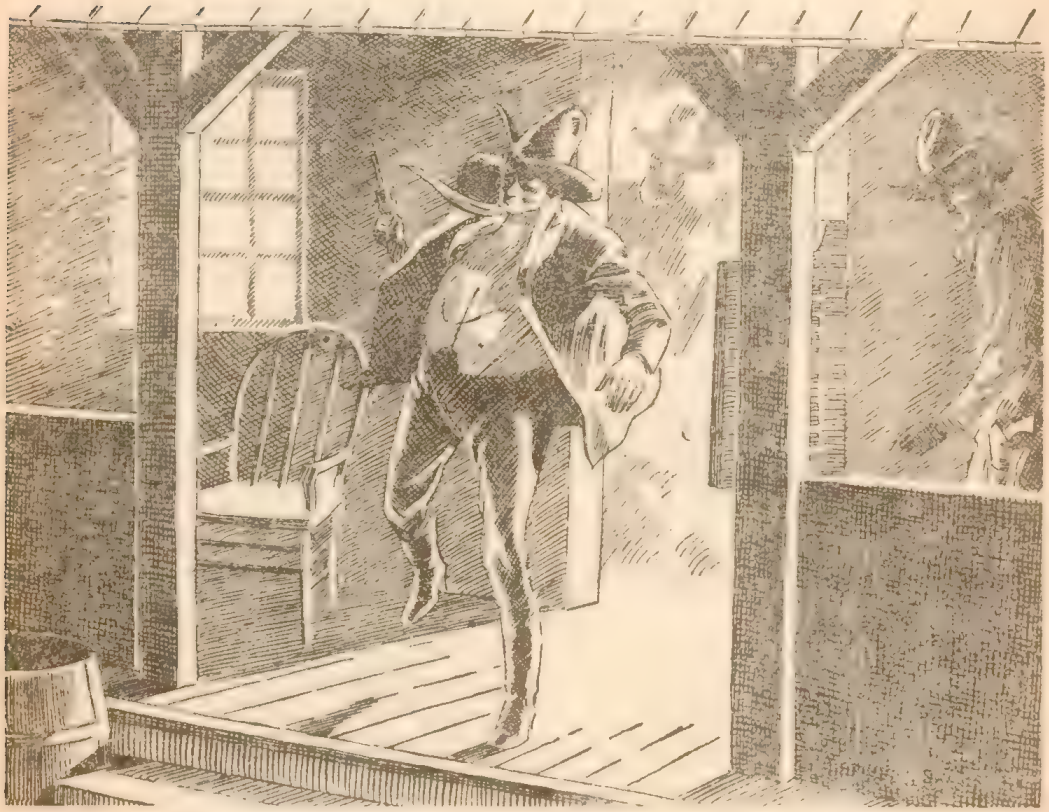
GREEK LOUIE'S HANGROPE RECIPE

By Lee Floren

(Author of "Gun-Slammer's Range," "Judge Bates, Coyote Catcher," etc.)



Hank Davis was on the prod as he came out of the Lazy Stirrup.

"You remind me of the daughter I once had, Madge. And I'm not going to stand by and watch your heart break, because Joe Cruse doesn't know better than to get himself killed by Hank Davis."

STEAKS WERE Greek Louie's specialty. He could take a hunk out of a steer, put it in a frying-pan, and do it to brown, tender splendor—and he was doing just that to a piece of steer when his waitress, Madge Smith, came running into the kitchen. Greek Louie laid down his spatula in disgust.

"How many times do I have to tell you not to run, Madge? What if you had a knife or a fork and you fell on it?"

"But there's going to be trouble, Louie!"

Greek Louie saw that her eyes showed fear. Instinctively he understood; he laid down his spatula and walked hurriedly through the swinging door into his restaurant's dining room. Even the diners had left their seats and the booths. They had grouped themselves around the window and door and were looking at the drama being acted out on the mainstreet.

Greek Louie pushed roughly through them, his big elbows working. Madge followed him and they went out on the street. The enormous Greek ran his glance once over the street, saw what was going on.

He saw that Hank Davis had just come out of the Lazy Stirrup saloon. He had pulled his two guns around, letting them ride low and forward on his thighs, and he was going toward young Joe Cruse, who was loading barbwire in his buckboard, in front of the hardware store.

"Davis has been drinking," said Madge Smith. "He says he'll kill Joe. Joe just got in town. He's going to fence—"

"I heard about it," said Greek Louie.

"Joe sees him now," said the girl. "We gotta do something—"

"We will."

Joe Cruse, for the first time, saw Hank Davis coming, and he knew there was trouble ahead. A good-looking, healthy young gent, he stood with his back against his buckboard, his hand on his gun. Greek Louie saw that, despite the fact that Hank Davis was a killer, Joe Cruse wasn't going to run. And a brief stirring of admiration touched the big Greek cafe man.

Now Hank Davis was almost opposite him. Greek Louie moved his massive bulk forward into Davis' path. Davis switched his small eyes from Joe Cruse to Greek Louie.

But Greek Louie didn't move. He said, "Don't do anything you'll be sorry for, Davis."

Davis repeated, "Get outa my way!" But Greek Louie stood stationary and Hank Davis went to step around

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him. Moving deceptively despite his enormous bulk, Greek Louie stepped forward and blocked his path again. From the corner of his eye, he saw young Joe Cruse coming toward them, and he knew he would have to act quickly. For when Joe Cruse arrived, there would be apt to be gun-trouble.

"Go back to the Lazy Stirrup," said Greek Louie. "Tell John Talbot to kill his own men, not to send a two-bit gunman like you!"

Hank Davis balanced himself on his bootheels. "I'll cram them words down your throat, Louie."

"Come ahead."

Hank Davis studied him cynically for a long moment. "Why, you pot-bellied Greek, I'll—" He stopped, looked at Greek Louie's hips. "Why don't you pack guns an' make that talk?"

"I don't need guns. I got my fists."

Hank Davis laughed. "Okay, you asked for it—"

HANK Davis never finished his sentence. His left fist smashed against Greek Louie's jaw. The heavy man shook his head, and doggedly moved in. Davis shot in a right, and missed.

Davis gave ground; he had to. Greek Louie's heavy bulk was moving ahead, his big feet shuffling in the dust. Davis moved backwards, crossing the street, hitting as he retreated. Blood came from Greek Louie's nose.

Behind him, the Greek heard the shouts of townsmen, but he paid no attention to them, and concentrated all his attention on Hank Davis. The taste of blood was salty against his tongue. His upper lip was split. Yet, inside the big man, a song roared through his blood.

His breath tore through his bloody nose. His knees were weak; his arms heavy. Then his second wind came. He bulled Hank Davis across the sidewalk. Through narrowed eyes he saw that Hank Davis' battered face was showing amazement. Davis had expected to knock him down with a blow or two and then, unwinded, take up his gunfight with Joe Cruse.

(Continued On Page 90)

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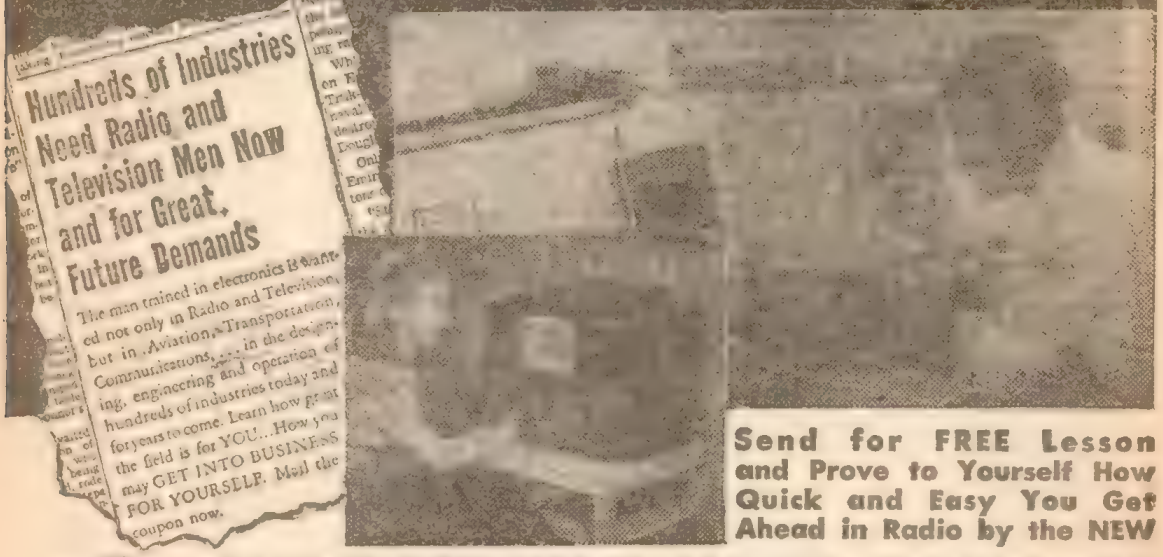
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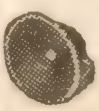

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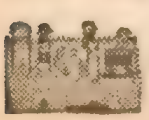

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(Continued From Page 88)

Hank Davis was fighting slower now, making each blow count. Greek Louie got him where he wanted him, then—Hank Davis backed into a building. Summoning all his strength and wind, Greek Louie moved in. He pressed Davis against the wall, holding him still for a moment; that moment was time enough.

He got his hold. He moved quickly, and few people saw how he did it. But one second Hank Davis was standing on the sidewalk, and the next he was flying through the air. He landed in a heap on the sidewalk and he did not get up.

"You busted my shoulder!" he said, groaning.

"Next time," said Greek Louie, "I'll bust your neck."

The crowd parted and Barry Lord, the town marshal, pushed through. He asked, "What t'hades is goin' on here?"

Greek Louie told him. "His shoulder is busted," he said.

Barry Lord looked at him questioningly. "How'd you ever learn how to bust a man's shoulder that way, Louie? I only figured you know how to crack the bones in a roast, not on a human."

Greek Louie smiled. "I wrestled once, in the ring. I even rassled the great Sandow, the Strong."

The marshal stared. "I never knew that." His voice lowered so only Greek Louie heard. "Watch John Talbot, fellow. Hank Davis is his top gunhand."

Greek Louie said, "Maybe I have to break Talbot's shoulder, too?" He mused for another moment. "No, I'll break his neck."

"Just be careful," said the lawman.

* * *

THE steak was burned to a crisp. Greek Louie ran his spatula under it and dumped it in the garbage can. His knuckles were stiff and sore as he put another steak on the griddle. He went out on the back porch, pumped some water out of the cistern, and carefully washed his face and hands. He was running a broken-toothed comb through his mop of

(Continued On Page 92)

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(Continued From Page 90)

gray-streaked hair when Madge Smith entered.

"T-Bone, rare. Spuds on the side." She looked at him, her brown eyes worried. She was a pretty girl with brown hair, a full face, and deep-brown eyes. She was frank and honest, and that's what he admired about her. "How do you feel?"

"Fine,' 'he said. He tried to smile, but his lips were pretty thick.

"Why did you do it, Louie?"

"For young Joe, of course. He's no gunman, and Hank Davis is."

"I don't believe you."

He looked at her. "What are you talking about?"

"You did it for me."

"My steak needs turning." She followed him into the kitchen. He turned the steak and said, "Any desert with this order?"

"No," she said. "You didn't answer my question, Louie."

"I did it for both of you."

"But I just work here, and Joe Cruse is only the man I am going to marry soon. Why would you fight for us?"

"Because I like you two."

Her brown eyes were thoughtful. "Now John Talbot will move against you, Louie. He has to. He's bossed this town, and this range, for a long time. Joe Cruse is the only man, until today, that dared to go against him. And when Joe filed on Wishbone Springs and came in town today for wire and staples, you know and I know that John Talbot sent Hank Davis out to kill Joe."

"I suppose he will have it in for me," he admitted.

A customer entered and she saw him over the swinging doors. She went into the dining room. Greek Louie flipped the steak on a platter, put on a scoop of fried spuds, and rang his little bell. Marge entered, took the platter.

"Ham and eggs. Coffee."

Greek Louie mumbled. "Dang that guy, why don't he get here in time for breakfast, not for dinner. I oughta charge him double—"

"You've said that for the year or so I've been here," said Madge.

Grumbling, Greek Louie cut off a

thick slice of ham, broke two eggs, and salted them. The back door opened then and Joe Cruse entered. Greek Louie looked at him and grunted greeting.

"Customers enter the front door, Joe."

Joe Cruse smiled. "I'm no customer of yours; I value my stomach. I'll eat my own cookin'." His voice lost its joking tone. "Damn it, Louie, what'd you mean by hornin' in on my battles?"

"Hank Davis might've killed you, Joe. Then what would Madge have done?"

"He might've killed you, too," countered Joe Cruse. "Why did you do it, Louie? For Madge's sake?"

"For yours, too." Greek Louie turned the ham over. "You're young, you two, and you got a good, long life ahead for each of you." He groped for the next words, finally found them. "How old do you think I am, Joe?"

Joe appraised him. "About fifty."

"Forty seven," corrected Greek Louie. "You don't know much about me, Joe. You didn't know until today I'd been a rassler. You see, Joe, I had a daughter once, just one daughter. Her mother died at the hospital, and I just had the girl. She grew up clean and fine, just like Madge, and then one day—well, she rode a lot and a horse fell with her." He studied the youth. "Now do you understand, Joe?"

"I sure do," breathed Joe Cruse.

AFTER Joe Cruse had left, Greek Louie was alone with his thoughts. He knew that either John Talbot or Hank Davis would force Joe Cruse into a gunfight, and one of them would kill him. He tried to tell himself it was none of his business, but he knew that he had to make it his business.

John Talbot, he knew, would be gunning for him, Greek Louie. Talbot had bossed this town for years; his prestige, his pride, were at stake. For if anybody bucked Talbot, and made his opposition good, then Talbot's day would be over; other ranchers, heartened by the fact that Talbot had

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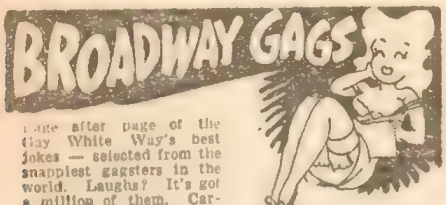

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once been crossed and whipped, would rise up and Talbot's day would be done.

He realized that John Talbot would not kill him openly. Talbot was no coward; he did not shoot from the brush. But he, Greek Louie, was too well-liked in town and, if Talbot drove him, a gunless cafe-man into a gunfight, it would just be murder; the town would not stand for that. Talbot would get him in some other, some hidden, manner.

Time alone would reveal that plan. And Time acted quickly, for even then John Talbot entered the kitchen by the rear door.

"The customers," said Greek Louie pointedly, "come in by the front door."

"I'm no customer," growled John Talbot. He was a heavy man, taller than Greek Louie, and almost as wide. His blue suit hung around his massive frame. His face was smooth, soft, and close-shaven. Tiny little eyes, small and sharp, nestled between heavy eyelids and bloated cheeks. He took a seat on the meat-block, one heavy hip hooked on the block's corner.

"Then get out," said Greek Louie.

But Talbot didn't move. He said, "It looks like you'll have to get out of town, Greek Louie. Yes sir, it sure looks that way. And dang it, in a way, I'm sorry to see you go. You been here about ten years, ain't you?"

Greek Louie was silent. John Talbot ran his small eyes over the kitchen. His gaze stopped on the ventilator-hood over the cookstove. "That thing ever get much grease on it, Louie?"

Greek Louie looked at him. "I keep it clean."

"Maybe sometime it does get some grease on it, cookin' grease, of course. Maybe one night—real soon—you close up and you don't clean it off. You think your fire is out—in fact, you're sure it is. But they must be a spark or two left, 'cause the kitchen catches on fire an' your restaurant burns down. Yep, burns plumb to the ground. An accident."

"An accident, hell!"

"What'd you mean?"

"You'd've set it on fire!"

Talbot's eyes glistened. "Could you prove that?"

"Maybe not," said Greek Louie. He pressed down on a steak with his spatula until the grease under it crackled. "But I'd know you did it."

"What good would that do you?"

"I'd bust your neck. With my two hands."

TALBOT'S eyes were smaller. "You talk big but there's nothing on your hip to back you up. Maybe if you had a gun you wouldn't talk so high an' mighty, 'cause somebody might call your hand and drive you into a gunfight."

"There's the door," said Greek Louie.

"I'm comfortable."

Greek Louie reached out, his hairy paw grabbing the front of John Talbot's coat, but he didn't move Talbot. His paw came back and cloth ripped. He tore out the front of both Talbot's suit and his shirt and exposed the man's hairy chest. John Talbot had a gun in a hideout holster under his left armpit. Greek Louie's hand shot out again and closed over Talbot's just as Talbot was pulling the hideout gun.

His stubby fingers, strong as steel talons, clamped over Talbot's big wrist. But John Talbot, apparently softened by easy living, still had a strong fiber of strength, there under his fat. Despite Louie's strength, he got the gun out.

The hammer fell. Lead tore into the floor beside Greek Louie's big left foot. The Greek shifted hurriedly. John Talbot never fired again; his muscles bulging, Louie pulled John Talbot around, and slowly he raised the man's heavy, resisting arm. The gun-arm pointed straight up now.

John Talbot's breath, hot and panting, pounded against Greek Louie's leathery cheek. Customers, attracted by the racket, crowded around the swinging door, staring at the two struggling bemoths. From the corner of his eye, Greek Louie glimpsed Madge Smith, and the terror and fear written across her lovely face stabbed into him like a sharp knife.

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his mind. He concentrated all his strength, his attention, on the gun. Now Talbot, with his free hand, was beating him in his guts, and the harsh knuckles beat against his corded belly muscles. Slowly, Louie got the right hold, and then John Talbot went down. Greek Louie had the gun then.

Quickly he tossed it into the rubbish can. Suddenly John Talbot, bunching his muscles, went forward, tackling Greek Louie around the ankles. The Greek hit the heavy chopping block as he went down, spilling it and cleavers and knives across the floor.

John Talbot was scrambling for a cleaver. Gone was all dignity, now; he looked like a bloody, shaggy bear, lumbering across the floor. Greek Louie hit him around the chest and bodily knocked him down. Now he was astraddle John Talbot, who lay on his belly.

Greek Louie's face was the color of a gray blanket. He grabbed John Talbot's ear, one in each fist, and started beating the man's face against the floor, using the ears as handles. John Talbot, his suit torn and dirty, was writhing and kicking, trying to break the hold. But Greek Louie kept beating his face into the floor.

Suddenly a harsh voice said, "That's enough of that, you danged Greek!"

GREEK Louie stared into the gun. Then his eyes ran behind the .45 to where Hank Davis stood, one arm in a sling. Hank Davis stood in the outside doorway. He cocked the gun, the click loud in the silent cafe. Slowly, Greek Louie got to his feet.

He said, "I ain't got no gun, Davis."

"If you had," said Davis, "I'd kill you!"

Now John Talbot got to his feet. He rubbed a fat paw across his bloody face and spat into the garbage pail. He saw his hideout gun there and he holstered it. He made a bloody, ludicrous figure standing there, his clothes half-torn from him, his eyes sharp behind their heavy folds.

"Kill him, Davis!"

Davis said, angrily, "How can I, Talbot? He ain't got no gun—"

Talbot interrupted, his voice laden

(Continued On Page 98)

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(Continued From Page 96)

with anger, "Kill him anyway!"

"And hang?" asked Davis. "I'm not decoratin' a gallows on account of a fat Greek. Think twice, Talbot."

Anger left John Talbot's eyes. He tried to pick a sliver out of his cheek and failed. Now that Talbot had wiped most of the blood away, Greek Louie saw that the man's heavy face was scratched.

"Let's go, Davis," said John Talbot.

Davis trooped out, following Talbot. The diners drifted back to their cold meals and gossip. Greek Louie tended to the orders on his griddle, saving those that had not burned too badly. Then he started straightening up his kitchen. He worked silently, his thoughts centered on Talbot and Davis.

He had, he thought, won the first fall, but that victory did not mean winning the match. The toughest, and deadliest, of the bout lay ahead. Madge was helping him, one eye on the dining room. And, he noticed, her pretty face was worried.

"What will they do now, Louie?"

"They'll do somethin'," said the heavy-set man. "First thing, they'll burn my restaurant. Talbot threatened to and that's why we fought. You see, Madge, they want me to get a gun, and go after them."

"Don't do that, Louie!"

He smiled as best he could. "I'm not all crazy yet, even though I have spent an hour or two chasin' cockroaches. I don't even hardly know how to shoot a pistol, let alone go against either Davis or Talbot. They'd kill me and they'd be protected by the law. They could let me start my draw a minute before either of them, and they'd still get me. And then they could plead self defense and be safe."

"You should have broken both of Davis' arms!"

Greek Louie hid his frown. Maybe Madge had something there. He went out in the back yard to go to the root-cellar after some squash. He saw Joe Cruse coming down the alley. He went back into the kitchen and said to Madge, "Run down to Coon's grocery and get me some flour. I need it right away."

"But you got some yesterday—"
"That's all gone. Hurry."

SHE left, frowning. He glanced into the dining-room. The afternoon lull had set in and the place was empty. Then he went to the root cellar. He was unlocking the heavy plank door when Joe Cruse came. Joe had two guns, now, and both were tied down tightly on his hips.

"Where'd you get the other gun?" asked Greek Louie. "And what are you going to do?"

"I've stood enough of this, Louie. You've fought two of my battles today. I'm fightin' the third. . . with gunsmoke!"

"Think of Madge!"

"I've thought of that," said Joe Cruse, grimly. "An' I've thought of lots of things in these last few hourse, Louie. It's better to be a man than a mouse, and I'm not a man. . . so far. I'm callin' John Talbot's hand first, an' if I get him an' am still alive. I'm callin Hank Davis."

"Talbot'll kill you," said Greek Louie.

"Maybe he will; maybe he won't."

The youth's jaw was set. He had made up his mind, and he was going through. Greek Louie suddenly thought of Madge Smith. He had another thought, too: this was his trouble also. And now Joe Cruse was going against Talbot and Davis. Greek Louie looked at Joe Cruse's left-hand gun.

"Where'd you get that Colt, Joe?"

"From Bob Johnson, down at the hardware store.'

"Nice looking gun," said Greek Louie. He moved closer, reached for the gun as though to inspect it. But he never drew the gun. His right arm came up, circling around Joe Cruse. Then his left hand, coming in quickly, mashed down around Cruse's mouth, stifling still-born his cry.

Joe Cruse was threshing, kicking. He was wiry and strong, but not as strong as Greek Louie. Slowly, Greek Louie dragged him down the root-cellar steps, pulled him inside the cave-like storage room. The musty odor of vegetables and potatoes assailed his nostrils but he had no taste for the earthy smell now.

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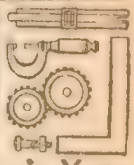

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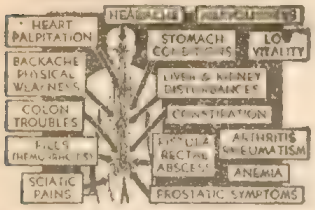

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A handful of heavy cords, used to tie potato sacks, hung from a hook within reach. One enormous paw still over Joe Cruse's mouth, he tied the youth's hands behind him. Then, using some clean potato sacks, he gagged Cruse and tied his feet with the cords. Puffing, he got to his feet.

Trussed and gagged, Joe Cruse stared angrily at him, his jaw working as he chewed on his gag. Greek Louie carefully wiped the dust from him an went outside. Madge had not returned from the store. Evidently nobody had seen, or heard, the struggle. Greek Louie closed the heavy door behind him and locked it. He was washing his hands when Madge came with the flour.

"Have you seen Joe?"

"No. Why?"

"Bob Johnson was talking to me. He said Joe made him give him another gun. Bob's afraid Joe wanted the gun to go against Talbot and Davis."

"He ain't around here, Madge?"

She frowned. "I beter go out and look for him." Fear had her, and Greek Louie's heart went out to her.

"Go ahead," he said. "The supper crowd won't come in for some time yet."

She hung up her apron and left. Greek Louie watched her trim figure go out the door, and inwardly he cursed Talbot and Davis. Madge was right: he should have broken both of Davis' arms and broken Talbot's neck. He thought that over for some time, his massive, beaten face a study in conflicting emotions.

The supper crowd starting coming in. Madge came, too. "He must have left town, Louie. I hope, for his sake, he has." Her words tumbled from her sudenly. "Davis and Talbot stopped me. I tried to step around them—"

"What did they say?"

"They'd been drinking. They—they intend to kill you, Louie. Oh, why,

did you get involved in it? You knew they were killers!"

"Hush, Madge."

SHE donned her apron, her fingers trembling, and went into the dining-room. The remaining three hours were busy ones. Greek Louie shuffled around his range, putting in lignite coal, greasing the griddle. But his thoughts were not on the browned potatoes, the simmering steaks.

His mind was over in the Lazy Stirrup saloon. There, in the back office, John Talbot and Hank Davis would be in conference, a whiskey bottle on the table, their guns cleaned and loaded. Greek Louie went over the predicament again, for the hundredth time.

He was no hand with a gun. That, then, was out; it would be suicide, no less. He had only his hands, and his brain. Again, in his mind's eye, he saw the back of the Lazy Stirrup saloon.

John Talbot and Davis would leave by the back door. They would not go out the front, townsmen would see them. Greek Louie knew they would waste no time; they would move against him that night. Then, suddenly, the solution became clear. The plan formulated in his mind, and he added in detail.

He sweated out each mental detail. He built the plan up and knocked it down, and he figured he couldn't miss. Talbot was the leader, the source of all trouble—and Talbot, because of that, would have to die. Davis was only a follower, a weak-minded satellite. No more, no less.

The supper crowd was finally fed. One by one, Madge extinguished the kerosene lamps, sending the dining-room into darkness. She carried the last of the dishes in and washed them kitchen for the next day's breakfast. She put the dishes away and dried her hands on the towel.

"You'll be careful tonight, Louie?"

"Don't worry about me, honey."

She came up to him. She stood on tiptoe and he felt her lips against his cheek. They were warm and sweet, and he thought then of another girl's lips—a girl who would, now, be just

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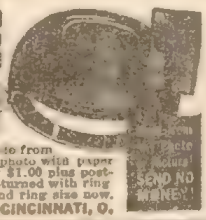

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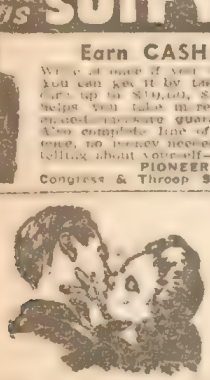

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about Madge's build and age and disposition. He held this emotion in him, and made his voice the same.

"Now what would Joe say?" he joked.

She said, "He'd make me do it again." She left then, and the front door closed behind her. Greek Louie worked hurriedly, then. He had a coil of rope in his pantry—a coil of hardtwist catchrope he had bought as a birthday present for Sonny Hayes, who was just entering the *cowboy* age. Putting out his light, he slipped out into the alley. He halted, a dark shadow, against the building.

The moon was rising over the eastern hills. Its softness was lighting the cowtown. He wondered about Joe Cruse in the root-cellar. Joe would be plenty mad by this time. But Greek Louie gave that brief thought.

Carrying the rope, he went down the alley. There, behind the Lazy Stirrup, he squatted against a building, watching the light in John Talbot's office. The blind was pulled low, but a rim of light showed under it.

Time dragged out. From here he could also see the back of his restaurant. Sounds moved across town: heels on the sidewalk out in front, a cowboy whooping, the pound of hoofs. But gradually, as the night grew older, these died and then, later on, silence held the town. Greek Louie looked at his watch. The time was almost two. He shifted positions, and waited.

Maybe, he thought, *I'm on the wrong track. Maybe they won't strike tonight.* After all, he realized, he was riding a hunch. Maybe he ought to go home—Suddenly the light in the office went out.

THE door opened and a man came out. Greek Louie, hidden between the two buildings, got slowly to his feet as the man came closer. The man would pass within a few feet of him and Greek Louie was hidden in the shadows. He glanced at the door. It had closed again.

The man moved silently, hanging to the shadows. Greek Louie saw he was carrying a gallon can. When he

passed, Greek Louie recognized Hank Davis. Quickly, the Greek moved forward.

One giant hand, crashing forward, smashed against the back of Davis' head, sending him lunging forward. He fell against a building and slumped out limply, the can upsetting and spilling its contents in the dust. Greek Louie grabbed his good arm, twisted it around, and the bone broke with a small *snap.*

The giant Greek wiped his sweaty forehead. He got a whiff of the can's contents. Kerosene. He knew then that Hank Davis had been going for his cafe, aiming to burn it down. Anger flared in the heavy-set man.

John Talbot, he figured, was still inside the office. Talbot had sent Davis out first, then, evidently, he intended to go out, and help Davis. That way, with one leaving at a time, they might not attract so much attention, if, by chance, somebody should happen to see them.

Leaving the inert Davis, Greek Louie gathered up his rope, and hurried forward. Anger pounded like a strong drum through his conduits. The shadow of the giant cottonwood, just outside the door, lay in lacy network across the alley. Greek Louie studied it, and built his trap accordingly.

The rope was thrown over a low, sturdy limb. Then, both ends gathered, the heavy man, puffing and panting, climbed to the top of a shed, directly behind the tree, and next to John Talbot's office. He hunkered there, a giant body limned against the moon, and built a loop in the rope.

He spread the hardtwist out, the loop on the roof beside him. His tongue was dry and his hands trembled. But he lost all sense of emotion when the door opened and John Talbot came out. He waited, patiently, until Talbot was under the tree. Then, just as the man entered the shadow, Greek Louie flipped out his noose.

The hartwist, coiling across the moonlight, sang a smooth song as it went forward. John Talbot heard this, and whirled. His hand went to

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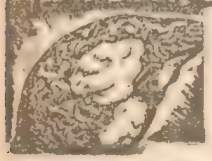

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the gun on his hip. Greek Louie's breath held as he saw the rope go beyond Talbot. Desperately, he tugged it back suddenly. The noose hung, suspended in air, then settled down, and it fell around John Talbot's neck.

GREEK LOUIE lunged on the free-end of the rope. The slack tore out of it, the cottonwood bowed under John Talbot's enormous weight. The range-boss, just before his feet left the ground, fired one shot. Greek Louie heard the high whine of a bullet, somewhere overhead. John Talbot never shot again.

His feet two feet off the ground, he swung there, limp on the rope. Greek Louie, his bulk braced against the hardtwist, looked desperately around for a spot to anchor his end of the rope.

A length of six-by-six studding ran out on the roof, behind him. He took dallies around this, and tied the rope solid. Somewhere, on mainstreet, he heard a man hollering. The fellow had heard John Talbot's shot.

(Continued On Page 106)

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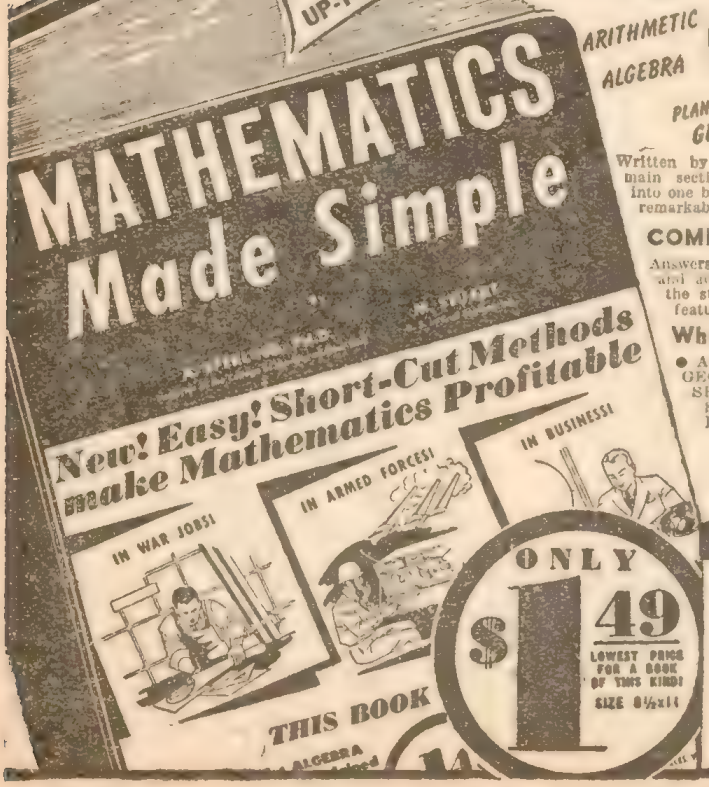

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(Continued From Page 104)

Greek Louie dropped to the ground. Twenty minutes later, when Marshal Barry Lord came into the restaurant, Greek Louie was serving coffee to the crowd, attracted by the night's doing.

"What happened?" asked Greek Louie.

Marshal Lord mopped his forehead. "Offest danged thing I ever officiated over. Danged if John Talbot didn't hang himself from that big cottonwood in his backyard! Dead as a horseshoe nail. And there was Hank Davis, flat on the ground, an' his neck was busted, an' so was one of his arms. The one you didn't bust this morning."

"Yesterday morning, you mean."

"Why argue over it," growled Lord. He wiped his forehead again. "Give me some coffee, Louie, an' plenty of it. Dangedest sight a man—" He shivered impulsively. "Well, they'll cause no more trouble."

Greek Louie shuffled into his kitchen. He looked at his fist. But he

(Continued On Page 108)

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(Continued From Page 106)

must have killed Hank Davis when he hit him on the head. Suddenly he thought of Joe Cruse, still in the root-cellar. Joe would be plenty mad. He looked at Madge Smith.

"Joe's in the root cellar," he said.

She stared. "How did he get there?"

"He was going to go against them two, so I tied him up. He'll be awful mad at me, Madge."

She studied him. "You didn't have anything to do with this happening—tonight did you?"

He smiled. "Can't a man commit suicide without me getting the blame."

"But Davis—You sure you—"

"Plumb sure. Now you better release Joe."

For the second time that day, she kissed him. "You old fibber. If Joe even thinks about getting mad I'll—" She kissed him again, and this time, she kissed him on the lips.

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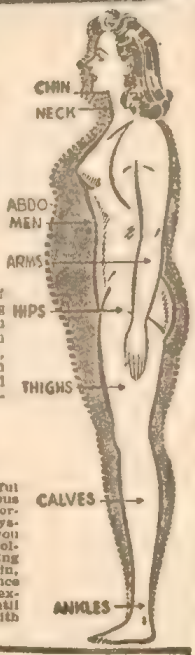

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CHUCK WAGON CIRCLE

A Fact Feature

By D. C. KERR

THE MEAL-TIME call from the cook-house of the old western ranch was the beating of a steel triangle, frying-pan or dishpan.

But out on the trail, or roundup, it was the familiar call of "Chuck!" which announced that the cook's struggles with his pots and pans, and the brush and cow-chip fire, were over, and that hungry hands—who most likely had been in the saddle since early dawn—could fill their empty stomachs with beef, beans, biscuits, and black cawfee.

But the chuck wagon, with its tail-gate cupboard and camp cook, was unknown to those of the early days of the cattle country. These were a development of the 1870's. Prior to that time various methods of feeding cow-hands were in vogue.

Immediately following the Civil War, it was the custom for each cow-hand to furnish and prepare his own food. Each man had a tin cup, and a small supply of coffee, salt, and sometimes sugar. In addition to this, each brought either cornbread or a quantity of meal. Meat was obtained by killing an animal as needed.

The earliest version of the chuck wagon, which was to become a symbol of the trail and roundup, was the "chuck mule." His carrying capacity, naturally, was much less than that of the later appearing chuck wagon.

Under the neck of this patient animal was sometimes lashed the huge, wide-bottomed coffee pot. Upon his back was tied the axe, frying-pan, and other odds and ends of camp equipment.

(Continued On Page 112)

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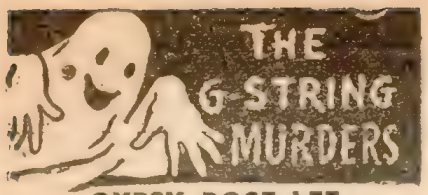

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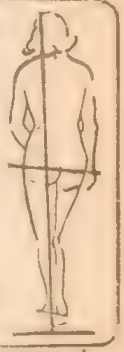

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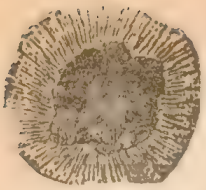

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(Continued From Page 110)

Following the "chuck mule" came the ox-cart—a small, two-wheeled, canvas-covered affair with a long tongue—drawn by a yoke of oxen. This did better service as a rolling kitchen.

Later the more modern chuck wagon—four-wheeled, covered, cupboard and table at tail-gate, and drawn by horses—came into being.

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Finished, each scraped the particles of food from his tinware, washed it, and stacked it in readiness for the next meal. Then, with pipe or quirly drawing, they relaxed, and those who were so inclined engaged in conversation or song.

It is easy to imagine that, even now, an old-timer who has gone to that "range in the sky," may be unsaddling his faithful pinto, and taking his place near a celestial campfire with the shades of his old companions.

In the soft glow of that fire, doubtless his tired face lights up as he smells the viands which the cook has prepared. And dumping his saddle and gear to the ground, he seizes tin cup and plate and falls to as of yore.

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(THE END)

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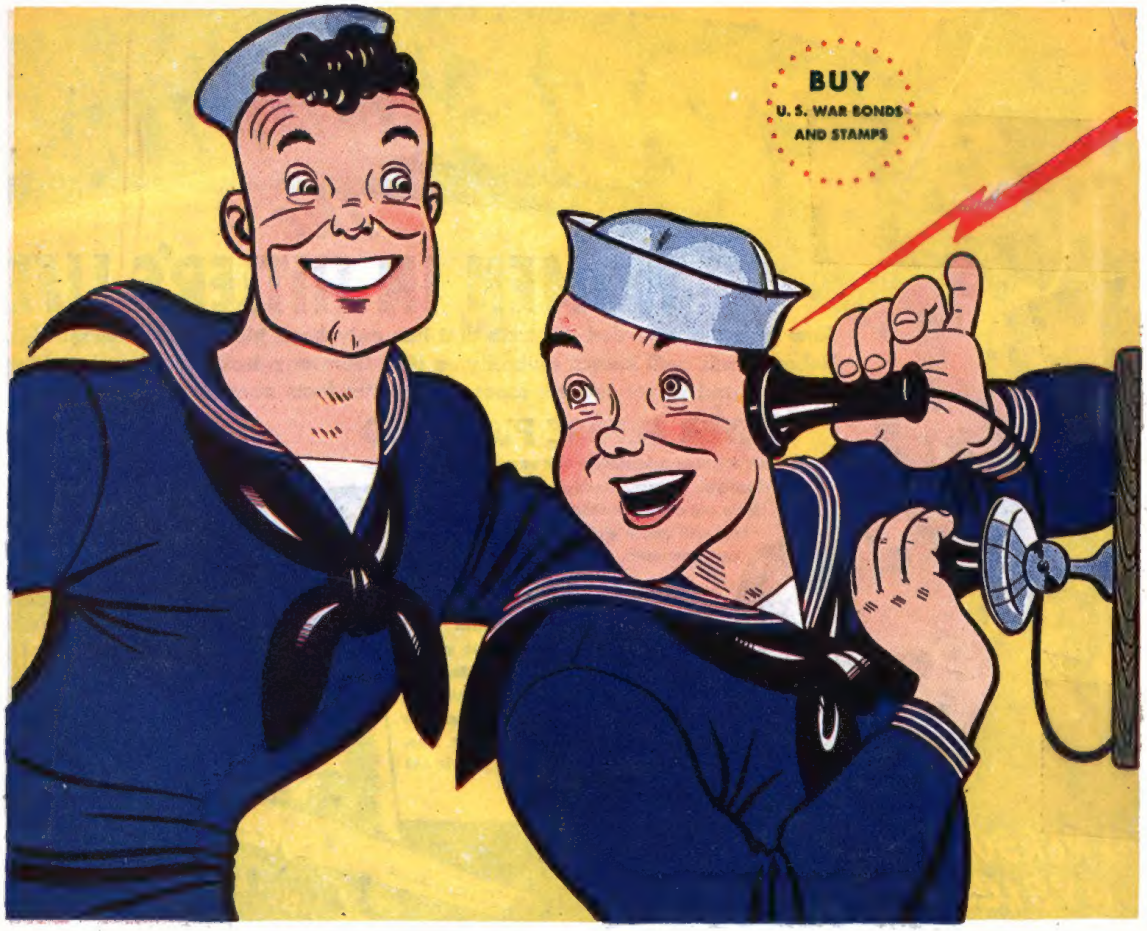

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